

**“Call me Mara for I am Bitter:” A Womanist  
Impression of the Wailing Women of  
Naomi/Laban Showers  
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**Abstract**

*This paper is one of a series of papers that have come out of a research project entitled “Botho/Ubuntu and Community Building in the Urban Space: An Exploration of Naomi, Laban, Bridal and Baby Showers in Gaborone. The project was carried out by a group of female researchers from across the University of Botswana and was made possible by the generous funding of John Templeton Foundation.*

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In this paper, we wish to explore and probe into the wailing that observably takes place during two of the showers researched on, namely, the Naomi and Laban showers. The major question that interests us here is “Why do the women, that is, the facilitators, receivers and attendees shed tears during these showers?” The question probes the teachings that occur as well as the possible experiences that inform the showers. One is tempted to think that there must be something intimate or even painful that is taught, shared, done, or talked about at the Naomi and/Laban showers that makes the women cry. Worth noting is that the Naomi shower celebrates the woman who is about to become a mother-in-law and the Laban shower celebrates the man who is at that stage too in his life. The teachings center on establishing harmonious relations between the prospective parents-in-law and their children-in-law as it were. The paper will proceed in the following manner: 1) A brief outline of the project including the methodology for data collection, 2) Theoretical framework, 3) A background on the Naomi and Laban showers, 4) A womanist investigation of the Naomi and Laban showers and 5) conclusions.

**Keywords:** *mothers-in-law, daughters-in-law, Botho/Ubuntu, womanist, Naomi shower*

## **Introduction**

One-woman whispers to a trusted friend:

“My son wants to get married. I am so scared for what it means. I do not want to lose him to another woman

(his wife). I really do not know what to do about it since he seems so adamant about his decision.”  
Woman1.

“Oh my....my... Are you sure? Is he ready for marriage? Does he know what it means to marry? Is he man enough to handle a wife” Call me mara for I am Bitter

Does he have the lobola ready?  
Woman2.

At another corner in another village, yet another woman exclaims,

“My daughter tells me that soon there will be some people coming to ask for her hand in marriage. I almost had a heart attack, and she seems so adamant about it. I am so scared for her” Woman3.

“Oh no! Are you sure she wants to get married? Does she know what it means to be married? Is she ready to face a mother-in-law? Is she ready for countless domestic errands and all the household chores; the 24/7 sex service to her husband; the gossips from her sisters-in-law and all that kind of stuff? In any case, let’s rejoice

because you will get the lobola,”  
sighs Woman 4.

It is not an exaggeration to suggest that the above represent some of the comments women make when their children are about to get married. It appears that mothers at that stage feel a mixture of emotions like nervousness, happiness, and confusion about the impending marriage. Often, the situation could be described as a dilemma for the mothers. She wants her daughter to get married, but from her own experiences whether married or not, she has some reservations and fears. Lobola (dowry/bride price) seems to provide some sort of comfort for one whose daughter will be getting married. As for their sons, mothers portray anxiety than mixed feelings. It appears there is some irk concerning the prospective daughter-in-law. This is probably due to the idea that has been expressed by earlier scholars and researchers that the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationship is one of the most difficult of the in-law relationships (cf. Jackson and Berg-Cross, 1988). The question of whether the notion is a stereotype or not belongs in another research.

The point of focus for the present article is that the Naomi and Laban showers were born from the underlying understanding that in-law relationships are some of the most sensitive and difficult relationships. The above-mentioned showers together with baby and bridal showers were investigated by a group of women researchers across the University of Botswana in a project titled

“*Botho/Ubuntu* and Community building in the Urban Space: An exploration of Naomi, Laban, Bridal and Baby Showers in Gaborone.” The project will be outlined briefly in what follows.

### **The research project outlined**

“*Botho/Ubuntu* and Community Building in the Urban Space: An Exploration of Naomi, Laban, Bridal and Baby Showers in Gaborone,” henceforth “*Botho/Ubuntu* Project” took place between 2016 and 2017. It was made possible by the generous funding of the John Templeton Foundation. The project had several objectives as outlined below:

1. Explore the theological and spiritual bases of *Botho/Ubuntu* values/ethics,
2. Examine how *Botho/Ubuntu* ethic was understood and manifested in traditional Botswana communities,
3. Analyse how the *Botho/Ubuntu* ethic is expressed in contemporary urban settings of Botswana,
4. Investigate how *Botho/Ubuntu* activities in the urban space construct and reconstruct gender, and,
5. Highlight how *Botho/Ubuntu* spirituality can inform the building and maintenance of justice-loving communities.

The research questions were as follows:

1. How is the *Botho/Ubuntu* ethic spiritually founded and manifested in the indigenous Botswana communities?

2. How does the *Botho/Ubuntu* ethic drive the Naomi, Laban, Bridal and Baby shower events in the urban space?
3. What cultural traditions and roles are produced, reproduced, or deconstructed in the urban space through the Naomi, Laban, bridal and baby showers.
4. How do these *Botho/Ubuntu* driven showers forge an African-founded spirituality?
5. How can *Botho/Ubuntu* spirituality foster justice-loving communities that rally against the encroachment of poverty in urban spaces and empower women?

In order to achieve the above objectives and find answers to the abovementioned research questions, the *Botho/Ubuntu* Project adopted a mixed method design. The significance of the mixed design is to use multiple data collection techniques as they play a supportive role to each other (Mertens, 2010; Creswell, 2009). A combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, as used in the project, has advantages of convergence, through the illustration of points, which bring in flexibility and verification of results. It also ascertains that facts are observed within the context and perspective of the respondent. The data qualitative methods enrich the variables under study by linking them to specific incidents and observations. The research design is, therefore, both descriptive and exploratory in nature. The interactive character of the showers necessitated such a combination of methods to answer the research

questions. As noted by Todd Jick (1979: 608), the importance of such integration has been advocated by many scholars (cf. Vidich and Shapiro, 1955). In summary, combining different methodologies in the study of one phenomenon, viz., triangulation (cf. Denzin, 1978; 1979: 604), is important in that the weakness in each method is compensated by the counter-balancing strengths of another.

We collected Quantitative data through a self-administered questionnaire from the attendees. Qualitative data was collected through participatory observation (cf. Bryman, 2001) coupled with extensive interviews of the organizers and recipients. These methods were outlined in-depth in the proposal of the research project. We used social media and other personal networks to get our informants who in turn invited us to the showers. We took turns in attending the showers in Gaborone and other urban or semi-urban areas of the greater Gaborone as Mogoditshane, Tlokweng, Kanye, Ramotswa and Mmopane. In this particular paper, we carry out a womanist investigation into the wailing that we observed throughout the Naomi (and Laban) showers we attended. It is worth noting that during the showers, there was a moment in which all the women attending would sob so much that some of the researchers would also be caught up in the wailing. Witnessing such emotional moments prompted us to do the investigation.

### **Womanist theory and its precepts**

Womanist strands of feminism challenge “the incapacity and/or unwillingness of western theologies” to change the status quo for disadvantaged women of colour (Masenya, 2005: 182). Although feminism forced mainstream hermeneutics to take note of women, it left out burning issues for marginalized women from colonized/formerly colonized countries, women from supposedly inferior cultures, poverty-stricken women and others who are not as privileged as caucasian women (Cf. Rey, 2012: 71). A womanist interpretation allows for a contextual analysis of texts, be they written or spoken, in order to allow them to interact with the lived experiences of particularly African women and other women outside of Western culture. It factors the questions of race, class and sexuality within ancient, modern and contemporary histories (cf. Collins, 2002: 234).

The approach is especially useful for our purpose in this paper as it allows the opportunity to take our experiences and those of others into consideration in our investigation. It underlines the need to take the views of black Batswana women reading Ruth for their own concerns and for the well-being of their communities. This type of analysis will allow us to interpret even as we listen to the hidden voices of those in the texts we are reading, observing, or listening to. Through the contextual womanist approach to the Naomi and /Laban showers here being scrutinized, we as participant researchers who share in the culture, experiences, struggles and pains



of those we were investigating, are better able to unearth what happens at the showers and possibly go beyond what the naked eye can see. The womanist theory as the lens through which we shall be analyzing the data collected from the showers, authenticates our present endeavor to further scrutinize the cries of the women at those showers. To use the words of Iniobong I. Uko, the women at the showers may be described as “moving from the margins to the center,” in the sense that they recognize how they participated in the oppression of one another, but they seek to birth their own liberation (2006: 86).

The theoretical lens presented here allows us to situate ourselves in the existing context within which the Naomi and Laban shower women use their voice. The presupposition here is that, as the women struggle to assert their own voices through the showers, they are confronted by the horrors of being women who are not only products of the patriarchal context but importantly as ones seeking to subvert the very context of their existence. Not surprising, therefore, the women cry as they seek to reinvent the patriarchal system they occupy while they initiate one another on ways of survival and resistance. The elderly women (and everyone) weep hoping that their recruits will see beyond the initiation and assert themselves in order to change. The reader might now be asking him/herself, “What is the Naomi and Laban shower? What happens there?” The questions are addressed in the section that follows.

### **Naomi shower described**

Our research into the shower revealed that the Naomi shower is organized specifically for women who are about to become mothers-in-law. We observed that women dressed in blue *mateitse*, white shawls and blue head scarfs gather together in a home usually on a weekend, past noon time. The setting is like that of a little party/celebration and is sometimes characterized by decorations with a theme color. The invitees arrive and each one is seen carrying a two-litre bottle or carton of soft drink or juice. There is a table set aside for dropping off the drinks and other wrapped gifts before one takes a seat. The event is spectacular. The women are greeted and welcomed to the ceremony by one designated for the duty on the day. Amongst the attendees are the Naomi and Laban shower facilitators who are elderly women; prospective mothers-in-law and sometimes fathers-in-law too from both sides (which is the idea behind the showers), prospective daughter and sons-in-law, friends and relatives also attend.

The history behind these showers is that they originate in Botswana. The little story behind their origin goes like this:

“There was a lady who was preparing to receive a daughter-in-law in the among us. Her friends were worried about how she was going to accept the new member of the family given that she was too possessive of her son. So, we, her friends, organized a counseling

session for her,” explains one of the facilitators.

It is further elucidated that the idea behind the initiative was to facilitate a smooth transition to mother-in-law-hood for the said woman. It aimed at fostering a harmonious relationship between the mother-in-law-to-be and her prospective daughter-in-law. The ritual was intended to set a social platform to share ideas and experiences on the issue. They named the ceremony, “the Naomi shower.” Ideally, the Naomi shower is to run simultaneously with Laban shower which is basically its male counterpart specifically for the prospective father-in-law. Usually, the showers are held at the same place for the parents who are about to be either giving away their daughter/son into marriage or who are about to receive a daughter/son-in-law. Both showers have their foundations in the Hebrew Bible.

**The Biblical roots of the Naomi shower:  
Retelling the Naomi and Ruth narrative**

The narrative from which the Naomi shower is founded is recorded in the Book of Ruth in the Hebrew Bible (Christian Old Testament). Naomi, her husband Elimelech and their two sons Mahlon and Kilion are said to have left their place of Bethlehem in Judah to go to the country of Moab to live there because there was famine in their land (Ruth 1:1, 2). While in Moab, Elimelech and the two sons all die, leaving behind three childless widows, namely Naomi and her daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah (Ruth 1:3-5). The embittered Naomi decided to go back home to Bethlehem, and she asked Orpah and

Ruth to also return to their maiden families (Ruth 1:8, 9). While Orpah heeded Naomi and kissed her mother-in-law goodbye, Ruth made the most powerful vow of all time to Naomi thus:

“Don’t urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God.” (Ruth 1:16)

Dana Fewell (1993: 12, 85) observes that the pledge is “an example of what loyalty entails” and a memorable and poignant statement of loyalty. Tull (1999: 56) describes Ruth’s commitment to Naomi as “fierce fidelity.” Ruth and Naomi went back to Bethlehem where they lived together in a loyal loving partnership as mother-in-law and daughter in law (Ruth 1:19). Worth mentioning, however, is that while in Bethlehem, Ruth seems to gain a new identity; away from her native home, she is frequently identified as a Moabite woman (Ruth 1:22; 2:2, 6, 21; 4:5, 10). As noted by Eunny Lee (2006: 90) there is emphasis on her Moabite ethnicity<sup>4</sup> and hence her foreignness. Significantly, the recurring emphasis on Ruth’s foreign descent echoes other biblical narratives about Moab which are marked by scandal and animosity (Lee, 2006:

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<sup>4</sup> Eunny P. Lee ‘Ruth the Moabite: Identity, Kinship, and Otherness’ in *Engaging the Bible in a Gendered World: An Introduction to Feminist Biblical Interpretations in Honour of Katharine Doob Sakenfeld* eds. Linda Day et.al. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), p. 90.

90:cf. Gen. 19: 30-38; Num. 22-24; 25:1-3; Deut. 23:3-6).

The story of Naomi and her daughter in law Ruth has attracted much attention in the scholarly world for many different reasons even until today. Scholars who have explored the narrative for one reason or another include the following: Musa W. Dube, in her article entitled *Divining Ruth for International Relations* (2001); Sarojini Nadar (2000), *A South African Indian womanist reading of the character of Ruth*; J. L. Chu (1997), *Returning home: The inspiration of the role differentiation in the book of Ruth for Taiwanese women* (1997); Jill A. Levine (2000), *Ruth*; Kwok Pui Lan (2004), *Finding a Home for Ruth: Gender, Sexuality, and the Politics of Otherness*; Tinyiko S. Maluleke (2001), *African Ruths, Ruthless Africans: Reflections of an African Mordecai*; Laura E. Donaldson (1999), *The Sign of Orpah: Reading Ruth through Native Eyes*; Mmadipoane Masenya (2004), *Struggling with poverty/emptiness: rereading the Naomi-Ruth story in African-South Africa*, and; Ben Mangrum (2011), *Bringing "Fullness" to Naomi: Centripetal Nationalism in the Book of Ruth*.

Without chronicling an annotated bibliography on the tale of Ruth as shown in the sparse and random examples above, one may conclude safely that the Book has been read and continues to be read and interpreted by scholars and believers across the globe. The tale of two women who are both widowed, childless and suffer lack (Levine, 2002),

has proven to be a source of inspiration at one level or other for many across continents and can be said to have stood the test of time. As tellingly observed by one scholar, the relationship between Naomi and Ruth “crosses ethnic and religious boundaries and flies in the face of social conventions” (Pressler, 2002: 265). The phenomenal relationship between mother-in-law, Naomi, and her daughter-in-law, Ruth in Ruth 1-4 is said to have led to the birth of the Naomi Shower in Botswana.

The research reveals that at the shower, the focus is on the mother-in-law-to-be, where she gains the designation, Naomi, and where her soon-to-be daughter-in-law is labelled Ruth. The article, through the womanist lens, explores the main teachings directed at the new Naomi and the possible reasons for the wailing that accompanies the activities at the Naomi shower.

### **Naomi shower: Where education takes place**

The sitting arrangement at the shower is such that the Naomi of the day sits on a special chair and becomes the queen of the day. If she is married and her husband is present, they sit next to each other and their son (the groom to be). Again, if the other family, that of the bride, is present, they sit together with their daughter (bride to be). The ceremony usually starts with a prayer and songs. One of the songs that characterize the showers is a Christian Setswana song titled *se lebale maikano a o ikanneng kaone* which means “do not forget the vows you took”.

While there are many songs sang during a given Naomi shower, the one mentioned here is of particular interest in that it echoes the heart of the Setswana teaching directed at women about marital and familial loyalty. It has been reiterated by scholars familiar with the Setswana culture pertaining to marriage that women are taught to be steadfast in marriage at all costs, a stance that can be detrimental to them (cf. Dube, 2003: 91; Kebaneilwe, 2011). We may assume here that the song might also be sang in remembrance of the legacy left behind by Naomi and Ruth – of true unfailing loyalty and love so uncommon between mothers and their daughters in law. Whatever the case may be, it is doubtless that the teaching emphasizes and encourages undying loyalty. A woman in African culture, as in Botswana is expected and taught to be selfless and self-sacrificing while men are not taught or trained to reciprocate (cf. Chirawu, 2006 and Kebaneilwe, 2011).

We observed that at the Naomi shower, there are many topics regarding married life that are explored. As mentioned earlier in the article, the focus is on the mother-in-law-to-be and it is aimed mainly at her relationship with her daughter-in-law who is about to join the family. Further still, as the prospective daughter-in-law is almost always, present the teaching spills onto her as well as to the rest of the attendees. These are the teachings that get the audience sobbing. The topics of the teachings here are picked randomly and extracted out of the data

that was collected during the research. Only three topics are dealt with:

**1. Marriage as a sacred institution by God:  
Warnings to the mother-in-law not to  
interfere**

Mashele highlights that Black South African daughters in law are expected to reside with their husband's family to learn the newly adopted family culture of the in-laws. Failure to follow the expected practices of the in-laws can result in a negative effect on the mother and daughter-in-law relationship

At one shower, the facilitator started her teaching with the following words:

“God has given you and you have to give the very best and the last”

The reading was taken from the biblical book of 1Kings 17:7-18 which is a story of the Widow at Zarephath who offered her last meals to Elijah and was blessed with more afterwards, so that her jar of flour and jug of oil never ran dry.

Parents were addressed as follows:

“What is your attitude as you give your daughter?”

“If you give wholeheartedly and gladly, God will bless you. If you as most parents give – partially – you reduce the blessings.”



“In Genesis 2, God realized that the man was lonely, so he made a woman for him and the two were to cling together and become one flesh,” she continued.

“We are here to talk about releasing children to go and cling to their partners. Marriage was created by God. We are here to talk about avoiding tearing what God has united.”

The teaching was then addressed to all the attendees thus:

“All of you here can either support or destroy this marriage. Marriage was created by God and founded by him. Although two people are getting married, their families remain active participants in it. So, what is their participation –*karolo*- in it? Are they building or destroying the marriage? Parents can destroy their children’s marriage. Since marriage was created by God, those who break it oppose God.

HIV and poverty have been addressed but no one addresses divorce. We seek to counteract divorce and strengthen marriages. We wish to see couples aging together. Consequently, we address parents as they also participate in breaking marriages which is sometimes due to lack of marriage.”

Reference then shifted to economic depression:

“Parents, if your children give less, please understand.”

Addressing the mother-in-law-to-be, the facilitator said:

“Your daughter-in-law is taking away your son. Do not try to continue controlling him.”

Addressing the daughter-in-law-to-be, she said:

“You cannot measure the worth of the gift. Those who are giving are giving in love and obedience to God. Multiply and fill the earth and have dominion. Have control in your house.”

## **2. Loyalty and fidelity in marriage**

Fidelity in marriage was one of the important topics at the Naomi showers that we attended. It was, however, directed to the bride and not the mother-in-law. As already indicated, the Ruth of the day is almost always present at the Naomi shower. Therefore, as Naomi gets to be taught, told and guided on what to do once Ruth comes into her life, Ruth also gets to be initiated into becoming a compliant daughter-in-law. Like her predecessor, the biblical Ruth character, the daughter-in-law-to-be is

exhorted to be loyal to her Naomi as well as to her husband.

Some of the statements that are made by the facilitators of the shower concerning the above subject include:

*Tsamaya o ye go rua dikgoro tsoo Rra...*, which translates as “Go and inherit the gates of your in-laws...” then they put the surname of the groom.

“Respect your husband. Queen Vashti was disobedient. A man needs respect. Feed him He should be fed. *A robale o seka wa mo tsenya* stress (let him sleep and do not nag him),” said the facilitator

“You should provide your husband with clean water for him to drink. The “well” should be kept sacred. He is the only one to drink from it”

The metaphor of a “well” to refer to the bride’s sexuality is interesting. The facilitators were adamant that as a wife the Ruth must keep herself sexually clean for her husband by being faithful to him because her sexuality exclusively belongs to him. She is expected to comply at all times to the sexual demands of her husband, which is emphasized through statements such as:

“Feed him and ensure that he is satisfied. No other man is to drink from his well as that would contaminate his water...”

Interesting, however, is that at the Naomi shower, they mention that they are breaking away from the tradition where husbands are allowed the latitude to be promiscuous (see Kebaneilwe, 2011), so, instead they claim:

*“Wa rona monna ga se selepe gaa adimanwe,”* meaning, “Our man is not an axe; he is not passed around.”

The saying is a negation of the traditional Setswana proverb that allows men to have multiple sexual partners whether married or not.

### **3. Mother-in-law’s total acceptance of her Ruth: Naomi as an expectant mother**

It is stated metaphorically that the mother-in-law (Naomi) is at this stage expecting a baby – her daughter-in-law (Ruth) and that on the day of the wedding she will be giving birth to her.

Naomi is told:

“On this day you are highly expectant. On the day of the wedding, you will be giving birth to ... (they insert the name of the daughter-in-law-to-be)”

“*Ngwana ke yoo, o monnye, o mo rute ditiro*: literally “there is the child, she is young, teach her what to do and nurture her in her duties. Run in your lane and let them (i.e. her and her husband) run in theirs, otherwise they will trip and fall.”

At this stage, the women ululate!!

Naomi is cautioned not to revenge on Ruth what she suffered from her own mother-in-law.

“We need to cut this chain. *Ke boloi* (it is witchcraft)” the facilitator exclaims.

Ruth 3:3 is quoted to Naomi to encourage Ruth to, “Wash and perfume yourself...” She is told to make sure that Ruth is clean and adorned with perfume as they walk together around the village attending ceremonies like weddings and funerals. Naomi is encouraged to be proud of Ruth and show her off to the village. She is told that she must teach her all the traditional roles and expectations. If she does not welcome Ruth, she is a witch; that is unacceptable.

It is further emphasized that those who are receiving the daughter-in-law are important as she will relocate to live with them. Therefore, the mother-in-law to the bride is regarded as the fitting recipient of the Naomi shower for she is going to live in her house with the Ruth.

Ruth 4:16 is read and directed to the mother-in-law (Naomi);

“Naomi took the child...*a belega ngwana*. She took the child and carried it on her back.”

Naomi is told to love and nurture the children of her daughter-in-law more than those of her blood daughters as is usually the case. She is instructed to carry them tightly in her back (*go ba belega*) while she holds their mother with her hand.

The in-coming daughter-in-law is instructed to love her mother-in-law whole heartedly too. She is told to take care of her and her husband, to do their laundry and to cook for them. She is told to become a giant who will protect what is hers in spite of all the challenges in her new life and family.

### **The Birthing Ritual**

At this stage, the Naomi and Ruth of the day are brought together in a little ritual that proves emotional as they both weep – all observers join in the weeping.

The following figures demonstrate the ritual:



Figure 1

In the above figure, the woman with open arms is the mother-in-law-to-be (Naomi) and the one standing in front of her is her daughter-in-law-to-be (Ruth). Open hands are explained as a symbol of Naomi's welcome to Ruth to become her daughter. She is told by the facilitators to take Ruth into her bosom as a sign that she is ready to nurse and nurture her once the wedding happens. The ritual concludes in the figure below.



Figure 2

In Figure 2, above the two women are hugging and murmuring promises to each other through tears, regarding their relationship from here on as mother and daughter-in-law. Naomi reassures Ruth that she has wholeheartedly accepted her as her own child and not just as a daughter in law. She promises that she will teach her everything that she needs to know about her duties and the culture that she is now being born into. As reciprocation, Ruth promises that she will love and cherish her new mother forever. As they both break into tears, all women now join in the sobbing.

### **A Reflection on the teaching: Womanist impressions**

It is fitting to conclude that in many ways the teachings as exemplified above have echoes of the Setswana traditional *go laya* (to counsel) ritual. One of the major differences between the Setswana *go laya* ceremony and the Naomi shower is that the former is made for the bride (*ngwetsi*) while the latter is for the mother-in-law (*matsale*).

It has been reiterated by previous researchers that at the *go laya* ceremonies, the bride is oriented to become a *mosadi* (a woman). This is to make her a compliant woman who knows the dos and don'ts of a woman and hence of womanhood (*bosadi*) as understood and expected in Setswana culture. We have observed that at the Naomi shower, the mother-in-law is emphatically encouraged to teach and hence to pass on her knowledge and experiences to her incoming daughter-in-law. She is exhorted to love



and cherish the daughter as though she was her biological daughter. As demonstrated in figure one, the mother-in-law opens her arms as a sign of embrace to the daughter who slips in and clings to her new mother. We observed that at this moment, the sobbing begins as all the attendees listen quietly to the murmurings between the two women. Some of the exchanges include the following statements that can be heard through the sobbing voices:

Naomi of the day: “*Dineo ngwanaka, ke a go amogela ka pelo yatlhe* (My child, Dineo, I receive you with all my heart).

*Ke sale ke go ratile fa ke go bona lantlha,* which means, “I have loved you since I saw or met you the first time.”

*Modimo a re thuse,* which translate as, “may God help us.”

Ruth of the day: “*Mama ke a go amogela gonna mama waaka go fitlha ka bosakhutleng,* meaning, “Mother I receive you to be my mother from now on and forever.”

*Ke tlaa go rata ke bo ke go reetsa ka nako tsotlhe* (I will love and listen to you always).

*Ke tlaa dira thomo ya gago* (I will do your errands).

This was observed to be the most phenomenal moment during the showers. It was a time when emotions flared up, getting everyone present to join in and shed a tear. What interests us is why that is the

case. Is there bitterness brewing within the mother-in-law as she now realizes she is about to ‘lose’ her son to another woman? What about the crying from the Ruth herself? Is she suddenly realizing she is getting herself into some serious and perhaps even enervating business of daughter-in-law-hood, or even that of being a wife, in the first place?

**Fear, bitterness, anger or empathy?**

Womanists have always maintained that in African communities and cultures across the continent, women are treated not only as second-class citizens but more so as weak, wicked, tricky, and unreliable – sometimes even as witches. Reiterating similar sentiments, Amanze (1998: 18) and Nkomazana (2008) argue that in Botswana, women are usually marginalized, associated with witchcraft, and could easily be blamed for misfortune to individuals and society. Therefore, one can easily surmise that such underlying negative beliefs are partly responsible for the birth of the Naomi shower after all. We noted earlier that the shower’s main objective was to build a harmonious relationship between the prospective mother-in-law and her in-coming daughter-in-law; hence, it is likely that women believe that the two women of our showers will have a problem relating with each other. Given that women are supposedly bad and, especially older women tend to be stereotyped as witches, mothers-in-law are allegedly expected to be worse in relation to their daughters-in-law. As indicated by one study which was done in South Africa,

“Daughters-in-law explained that due to the negative views that society has about mother-

daughter-in-law relationships, they anticipated to have a bad or challenging relationship with their mothers-in-law” (Nganase and Basson, 2017: 74).

Perhaps such are some of the fears running through the minds of the two women who are about to start a relationship because of the one man they both love – a son to one and a husband to another. The big question is, as ‘women,’ are the two really, able to share harmoniously what they have claims on?

Marriage has been described as one institution in Botswana where gender roles are accentuated and reinforced often to the detriment of women (Dube, 2003). Another scholar expresses the ideal of Setswana marriage as pertaining to women in the following:

“From childhood, girls are socialized in a manner that befits womanhood. They are taught to be loyal, obedient, and polite. They learn to do household chores in preparation for responsible womanhood to enable them to fend for their families in the future. They are therefore “groomed” for marriage, childbearing and caring for family members, especially male relatives, and the husband” (Nkomazana, 2008: 4).

Thus, when getting into the institution of marriage, the bride remembers what her mother might have taught her as a child such as, a ‘woman’ cooks for

her husband and provides him with sex. Her body belongs to him, she keeps the house and bears children, especially sons. Through womanist eyes, one can deduce that such memories of great burden and responsibility might cause the women to cry.

### **Other possibilities for bitterness**

In some instances, still, we explore more possibilities for women's sobbing, the first being that both women have been exposed to some alternative teaching regarding womanhood that they now deem non-compliant to the expectations of Setswana marriage. For example, Nganase and Basson argue that "In many countries where modernisation, industrialisation and social movements are changing the cultural landscape, the in-law relationship is also facing a revolution of sorts" (2017: 66). The second possibility is that one or both women have been socialized to see things differently; to reclaim her right as a person as opposed to being a subordinate. This could also lead to the shedding of tears as she imagines what is ahead of her as a mother-in-law or a daughter-in-law. The third possibility is that the older woman here (the Naomi) might be wondering if what she has been told in the teachings that she needs to teach the younger woman (Ruth) would be acceptable to Ruth or vice-versa. Ruth could be anticipating Naomi's every move and prepared to counter it. The crying therefore might signal a consideration of anticipated difficulties or past painful experiences in the in-law relationship.

What about the rest of the women who are watching and listening during the shower teachings? Are they able to identify with what lies ahead for both the Naomi and Ruth? Do they think the Naomi here will become a witch to Ruth? Do they believe that Ruth will be able to perform her daughter-in-law and wife duties enough to be called a *mosadi tota* (woman enough)? They could also be wondering if Ruth will bear children to prove her womanhood. From the way sterility and childlessness in marriage is usually blamed on the woman (cf. Calves, 1999; Baloyi, 2017), the women might be bothered about Ruth at this stage, except if she has a child already.

As the two women exchange words, we assume that almost every woman present has suffered some pains of some sort in their lives in matters of relating with their mother-in-laws and sexual violence, whether during dating or marriage. Some Naomis of our Botswana context have been scarred by their husbands' or partners' infidelity. When they now have to welcome Ruth into the patriarchal institution, they are likely to re-live the pains and hurt. Hence, they could weep if those memories *are* invoked. At the same time, the Ruths of our context may also at one level or other have been exposed to the hurt of sharing their bodies with unfaithful partners (men) and at this stage may be imagining what it is going to be like in marriage. Studies have shown that in some African cultures, men have the latitude to be promiscuous while women are barred from it (Dube, 2003; Kebaneilwe, 2011). Additionally, some women have suffered marital rape but silently

continued to plod on in their marriages (Kebaneilwe, 2012). Others have even contracted the deadly AIDS due to the infidelities of their partners or husbands (Gichaara, 2008: 194). These could be some of the reasons for the wailing, the possibility being that both women might be recalling their experiences of relating with men or recalling such stories from those around them. The same applies to the rest of the women in attendance whose emotions are also captured in tears by the researchers.

### **Conclusion**

The wailing that happens at the Naomi shower could be caused by a multiple of past experiences, pains, and hurts. There could be bitterness especially from the new Naomi for losing her son to another woman (the daughter-in-law); Naomi could be remembering her own struggles as a former Ruth or the pain of other fellow Naomis that she has encountered in the past, imagining what her new life is going to be. Naomi could be standing in the shoes of her Ruth in terms of the infidelities that some Batswana men are notoriously known for and wondering if her beloved son would respect his wife and not cheat on her. Some of the wailers, including Naomi and Ruth, may have been formally exposed to domestic violence from their male partners, the consequences of barrenness or the problem of being considered a witch by their daughters-in-law. The list goes on and on but really who can explain the wailing at the Naomi showers.

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