Botho/Ubuntu: Community Building and Gender Constructions in Botswana

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Abstract

Botho/Ubuntu is a community-building ethic that urges individuals to define their identity by caring, welcoming, affirming, and respecting the Other. This article investigates how botho/ubuntu ethic was understood and manifested in traditional Botswanan communities. It explores how botho/ubuntu is expressed in the preparation and arrival of a new daughter-in-law, the reception of the mother-in law, and the preparation for the arrival of a new baby. The article analyses these three cases to investigate the possible co-habitation of botho/ubuntu with patriarchy by exploring the practices and rituals surrounding the welcoming of new members by the community and key hosts. The investigation focuses on marriage and the arrival of a new daughter-in-law (ngwetsi); mother-in-law (matsale) as a key host; and the arrival of a new baby, including the care offered to a nursing mother (go baya botsetse). It seeks to examine how botho/ubuntu practices create female spaces and networks while t still co-existing with patriarchy in the Setswana rituals and practices of welcoming the Other. The article will also explore how women are using some of these activities to create female cultures that deconstruct oppressive gender roles.

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I. Introduction to *Botho/Ubuntu*: Worldview and Spirituality

In articulating the African understanding of being human and living in community, John Mbiti has popularized the saying, "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am."[3] The saying with its recognition of the individual "I am" emphasizes that one's humanity is only realized in the context where "we are," that is, in a communal setting. The second part of the saying focuses on community (the "we are") yet the we only become a community when each individual's humanity is fully recognized and considered to be as important as the community. For Batswana, and most Bantu people, *Botho/Ubuntu* is a concept of acceptable relational living, which is measured by one's relationship to family, community, the environment and the Divine powers (ancestors and God)[4]. This relational perspective is best captured by the popular saying, "*motho ke motho ka batho*," in Sotho-Tswana languages or *"umuntu ngu muntu nga bantu"* in Nguni languages, both of which mean that a human being is only human through other human beings, that "a person is only human through living in community," or according to Dumi Mmualefe, that "without others one cannot be."[5] This saying articulates what Bantu people believe about "*motho/umuntu*" (a human being) and the act of being a human (*Botho/Ubuntu*) and of living according to that ethic in the community.[6]

Community is widely understood to include the living, the divine powers, and the environmental community in an interconnected fashion. Indeed, most African communities identify themselves with a particular animal—a totemic practice. We have such ethnic groups as Bakwena and Bakgatla, those who identify with the crocodile and the monkey respectively. Different Bantu communities identify with different animals

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[3] John Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophies* (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1970), 141.

[4] Musa W. Dube, *A Theology of Compassion in the HIV & AIDS Era* (Geneva: WCC, 2008), 140. .

[5] Dumi O. Mmualefe, "Botho and HIV and AIDS: A Theological Reflection" (Master's Thesis, Eden Theological Seminary, Missouri, 2004), 7.

[6] Mmualefe, "Botho and HIV and AIDS," 10.

or even inanimate members or elements of the earth such as the eland (*khama*), lion (*tau*), elephant (*tlou*), and tshipi (*iron*). The totemic identification underlines that the *botho/ubuntu* understanding of community includes a web of relations that are not necessarily anthropocentric. Rather, the *botho/ubuntu* concept of community includes non-human members of the earth. Consequently, Puleng Lenka Bula underlines that *botho/ubuntu,* a concept that evokes "relationality and respect for humanity is explicit in the understanding that human life cannot be full unless it is lived within a web of interactions of life, which include along with human beings also creation."[7] She explains that *botho/ubuntu* is "a concept which attempts to describe the relationship of a person as being-with-others" and that "its core message is about the essence of being human in relation to other people and creation."[8]

The *botho/ubuntu* understanding of community also includes the ancestors, who are a moral community that re-inforces relations among the living.[9] The ancestors, though they are departed members of family and community, are believed to continue to show positive interest in the wellbeing of the living by interceding before God for their wellbeing. The ancestors, however, can withdraw their services to the living if the latter do not honor their relationships with one another, the environment, and the divine powers. Symptoms of withdrawn services are characterized by the experience of ill-health, while environmental disruption is characterized by such things as drought, extreme floods, and climate change. In the *botho/ubuntu* worldview, ill-health and environmental disasters are indications that individuals and communities are no longer maintaining healthy relationships within family, community, and environment and consequently with the divine powers.

What passes as "sinful" within *botho/ubuntu* framework is the disruption of relationships, and these then necessitate rituals of reconciliation. Symptoms of disruption are a call for righting relationships. Healing in the African ethical worldview of *botho/ubuntu* is thus preceded

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[7] Lenka B. Puleng, "Beyond Anthropocentricity:*Botho/Ubuntu* and the Quest for Economic and Ecological Justice in Africa," in *Religion and Theology* 15 (2008): 375, 377.

[8] Ibid., 379.

[9] Lesley Le Grange, "*Ubuntu/Botho* as Ecophilosophy and Ecosophy," in *Journal of Human Ecology* 49/3 (2015): 301-08.

by healing of relationships, prior to medical treatment.[10] In playing this role, ancestors are thus a central moral community in enforcing the continuity of *botho/ubuntu* ethics among the living.[11] Mmualefe best captures the theological function of *botho/ubuntu,* holding that "*Botho* is what constitutes God's image in us, and that...according to the *Botho* worldview, one can never be a Christian or attain salvation *asena Botho* (without *Botho*)." [12]

I.I *Botho/Ubuntu* Ethics and Praxis

How then did the *botho/ubuntu* ethic structure people's day-to-day lives and build community? *Botho/ubuntu* pervaded all aspects of individual and communal human relations. In governance, for example, *botho/ubuntu* was best described by the saying, "*kgosi ke kgosi ka batho,* namely, that a ruler can only rule in consultation with people, or could only rule through people. Accompanying this ethic of valuing community in governance were the sayings that, "*mafoko a kgotla a mantle otlhe"* and "*mmualebe oabo a bua la gagwe"* or that in the public court/meeting everyone must be free to express their views. It is also held that *kgosi thothobolo e olela matlakala* or that a public leader or king, like a dumping site, should welcome and hear all people. These sayings affirm the dignity of both the individual and community. *Botho/ubuntu* governance thus included welcoming and giving land not only to members of the community but also strangers seeking to settle in the community. The economic practice of *mafisa* hihlights this *botho/ubuntu* ethic in action. *Mafisa* was a cattle-based loan practice, whereby poor members of the community would receive cows from the rich, which they would then use for milk and for their draft power, while taking care of the cattle. Yearly, rather than pay the owner interest on the cow, the recipients would be given another cow, with the result that within five years, the recipient would have enough cows to begin their own cattle post. *Mafisa* ensured that underprivileged members of the community could live in dignity and build up wealth, rather than be consigned to a life of poverty.

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[10] Musa W. Dube, "Divining Ruth for International Relations," 67-80, in K.A. Adam, eds., *Postmodern Interpretations of the Bible* (St Louis: Chalice Press, 2001).

[11] Le Grange, *Ubuntu/Botho as Ecophilosophy.*

[12] Mmualefe, *Botho and HIV and AIDS*, 26. .

The *botho/ubuntu* ethic and its community-building spirit was also particularly evident in individual projects such as building a house, digging a well, ploughing, weeding, and harvesting. For such projects one called for *letsema,* or *molaletsa.* In the latter one cooked food and invited members of the community to come over and spend the day assisting by providing free labor etc. *Letsema, molaletsa, and mafisa*[13] were *botho/ubuntu*-inspired community-building activities that ensured that members of the community assisted each other economically and in the provision of labor. The communities had strong ties that were forged largely through totemic kinship, blood, marriage, and shared communal social structures and ethics that were enhanced by geographic and ethnic ties.

One of the most beautiful definitions of *botho/ubuntu* appears in *Vision 2016: The Long Term Vision for Botswana.* It states that it is a "process of earning respect by first giving it, and of gaining empowerment by empowering others"[14] But was it also able to overcome patriarchal constructions and ethics? Does it affirm the full humanity of women and other minorities? In a recent article, Chitando argues that

> Sexual and gender-based violence is prompted by the problematic socialisation of the boy children. Brought up to command and dominate, boys regard women and girls as being permanently available to meet their desires. Whereas Ubuntu expresses the notion that, "I am because we are, and we are because I am," in practice, the personhood in African cultures has been construed and constructed in a hierarchical manner, with men enjoying a fully privileged status. The full membership of women in a community that places emphasis on the solidarity has not been taken as a given. Indeed, as women activists ...have argued, African societies need to accept this simple but profound truth: A woman is a human being![15]

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[13] Joseph B. R. Gaie and Sana Mmolai, *The Concept of Botho and HIV and AIDS in Botswana* (Eldoret: Zapf Chancery Research Consultants and Publishers, 2013).

[14] Botswana Government, *Vision 2016: Towards Prosperity for All* (Gaborone: Government Printers, 1996)..

[15] Ezra Chitando, "Do Not Tell a Person Carrying You that S/He Stinks: Reflections on Ubuntu and Masculinities in the Context of Sexual and Gender-

Indeed, the *Gender-Based Violence in Botswana Indicators Study* confirms Chitando's argument. It notes 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."[16] How can violence and discrimination of any form exist in communities that subscribe to ubuntu? In fact, most communities subscribe to heterosexual patriarchal values, meaning that men are expected to occupy a higher status than women. In the heterosexual patriarchal perspective, relationships exist in a hierarchical manner and women, children, and other minorities occupy a lower position in this social hierarchy. This hierarchical ordering of relationships contradicts the *botho/ubuntu* ethic which seemingly embodies equality, affirmation, and care for the Other. Molly Manyonganise has provided a critique of *botho/ubuntu* from various perspectives, holding that it accommodates oppression and that the dominance of African male philosophers has not helped. Manyonganise argues that "*ubuntu* is full of the whims and caprices of patriarchy" and needs to be interrogated, using the yardstick of the human dignity for all.[17]

Since *botho//ubuntu* recognizes the rights and the responsibilities of all people, whether individual or collective, it should also promote the social and individual well-being and wholeness of all. A woman experiencing violence and discrimination on the basis of gender is denied an experience of *botho/ubuntu* because she does not experience wholeness. A man who violates a woman fails to promote the social well-being of that women and her family. He violates her rights and thus also the *botho/ubuntu* ethic. Indeed, any form of discrimination devalues the human dignity of both the one discriminated against and the one who discriminates. As the Batswana would say, "*Gase botho*" that is, it is against the ethic of *btho/ubuntu*, which not only bids individuals to define their identity by caring, welcoming, affirming and respecting the Other,

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Based Violence and HIV," in Elna Mouton, et al. *Living with Dignity: African Perspectives on Gender Equality* (Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2015), 276.

[16] Gender Links and Women's Affairs Division, *Gender-Based Violence in Botswana Indicators Study.* Gaborone: Ministry of Labour and Home Affairs, 2012, 11.

[17] Molly Manonganise, "Oppressive and Liberative: A Zimbabwean Woman's Reflections on *Ubuntu*, *AOSIS Open Journals,* 2015:1-7.

but also urges us to earn respect by first giving it, and to gain empowerment by empowering others.

In this article, we therefore seek to interrogate how *botho/ubuntu* may co-exist with patriarchy in Botswana by investigating rituals and practices related to welcoming a new daughter-in-law, welcoming a new baby, and the role of mother-in-law. This article seeks to establish, first, how these practices embody *botho/ubuntu*; second, to interrogate how traces of patriarchy persist; and last of all, to ask how these indigenous practices of receiving a daughter-in-law and a new baby may inform the current women-centred social gatherings practiced in urban spaces, namely, the Naomi and the Laban rituals, and bridal and baby showers. This information has been gathered through fieldwork.

I.I.2 Feminist Theories: The Self in Relation Perspective

How do we explain the beautiful ideal of *botho/ubuntu* and its co-existence with patriarchy? The self-in-relation theory propounded by Jean Baker Miller[18]-[19], Gilligan,[20] and Jordan et al.,[21] is partly helpful here. This theory posits that women organize themselves around relationships and the ethic of responsibility, care, and nurturing others. Prior perspectives shared the premise that separation, autonomy, and differentiation are marks of a healthy adult whereas connection, affiliation, and mutuality were deemed to be childish traits. The self-in-relation perspective was a departure from this standpoint and acknowledged the divergent path that women were taking in the construction and experience of the self. Although all women cannot be put into one box, nonetheless a relational and connected path was perceived by many to be a more healthy path for women's development. This path included affirming the needs of the other, adapting one's needs to those of others, and using one's relational strength to enhance other people's well-being. Women are, therefore,

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[19] Jean Baker Miller, *What do we mean by relationships?* (Work in progress No. 22) (Wellesley: Stone Centre, Working Paper Series, 1986).

[20] C. Gilligan, *In a different voice: Psychological theory and women's development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).

[21] J. V. Jordan, A. Kaplan, J. Baker Miller, I. Stiver and J. Surrey, *Women's Growth in Connection: Writings from the Stone Centre* (New York: Guilford Press, 1991).

involved in other people's lives through empathy, caring, and capacity for intimacy. This continuity of care makes women emotionally explorative and connective. Women may therefore so value connections that they may interpret disruptions in these connections as not only a loss of a relationship, but also as the total loss of self.

Cultural feminists recognize that the capacity for intimacy and relationships with other people should be celebrated and seen as a prerequisite for social equity, peace, and stability. It is in connections that one is enabled to develop meaningful and fruitful lives and to allow others to reach their aspirations and goals as well. The extent to which an ethic of care affects women's well-being has been explored in many studies. Jack[22] hypothesizes that because of the way women relate, they learn to censor their needs, thoughts, and emotions to cultivate harmony and satisfaction in their relationships. According to Montemurro, (Naomi), Bridal and (baby) Showers have developed as "rituals of obligation" with "an established structure and scripted activity."[23] Here, we bring these feminist frameworks into conversation with *botho/ubuntu* concepts, activities, and practices in order first, to analyze whether traditional practices of the *botho/ubuntu* ethic in rural areas embrace patriarchy. The second part of the research[24] will examine how in various urban spaces showers (namely, Laban, Naomi, bridal, and baby showers) burden, empower, or compromise women's wellbeing.[25] We will carry out fieldwork to explore how these urban space showers constitute female networks that construct, reconstruct, and deconstruct gender.

In what follows, this article examines marriage and the arrival of a new daughter-in-law; the mother- in-law as the primary host of the new daughter-in-law and the arrival and reception of a new baby, *go baya botsetse.* These three cases will be addressed in their given order to investigate the ethic of *Botho/Ubuntu* at work and the persistence of patriarchy.

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[22] D. C. Jack, *Silencing the Self: Women and Depression* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991).

[23] Beth Montemurro, "Add Men, Don't Stir: Reproducing Traditional Gender Roles in Modern Wedding Showers." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography, 34* (1) (February, 2005): 6-25.

[24] To be published in a subsequent paper once fieldwork is complete.

[25] This article is therefore the first part of a larger piece of research. It will be followed by fieldwork among urban communities in Gaborone.

II. *Dikuku di Monate Lenyalo le Boima:* A New Daughter-in-Law Arrives Amongst Us

The institution of marriage with its values and essential rituals is possibly as old as human existence. It is a social, cultural, and religious invention and construction. According to Paul Kyalo, marriage is the "lifelong union of husband and wife."[26] Marriage is (partly) invented for "mutual support and progeny to continue the ancestral line and to promote the welfare of the tribe or clan."[27] Marriage is also a practice of the philosophy of *botho/ubuntu* specifically in its practice of families uniting and continuing a lineage through the union of their children. In the following, we trace the communal practices of preparing for the arrival of *ngwetsi* or daughter-in-law; we will highlight this practice as a *botho/ubuntu* philosophical practice with attention to the significance of gender in the practices.

In the opening of his chapter on Setswana marriages, the British anthropologist Isaac Schapera asserts that "the family among the Tswana is founded upon marriage."[28] Marriage was shaped by various customs and practices, including systems of lineage and descent. James Denbow and Phenyo Thebe[29] identify two types of lineage and descent into which the Batswana people were organized: matrilineal and patrilineal, that trace "unilineal descent systems."[30] The matrilineal system traces descent through the "female or uterine lines."[31] The patrilineal system traces descent and inheritance through "male or agnatic lines."[32] The descent and inheritance systems had implications for negotiations, descent, and inheritance within marriages. For instance, Denbow and Thebe provide the Herero people of northwestern Botswana as an example that practices both

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[26] Paul Kyalo, "A reflection on the African Traditional Values of Marriage and Sexuality." *International Journal of Academic Research in Progressive Education and Development, 1* (2) (April, 2012): 211.

[27] Ibid., 211.

[28] Isaac Shapera, *A Handbook of Tswana Law and Custom: compiled for the Bechuanaland Protectorate Administration,* with an introduction by C. F. Rey, new introduction by Simon Roberts (Hamburg, Lit Verlag, 1994), 125.

[29] James Denbow and Phenyo C. Thebe, *Culture and Customs of Botswana* (London: Greenwood Press, 2006).

[30] Ibid., 135

[31] Ibid., 136

[32] Ibid.

systems, what they call "double descent."[33] A double descent, they assert, "traces relationships and inheritance through both male and female lines, usually with specific goods, obligations, and rights passed down either through the mother's or the father's side of the family."[34] This also had implications for the children born within a Herero marriage.

II.1 Setswana Marriages as Examples of *Botho/Ubuntu* Practice.

Botho/ubuntu is, according to Lesley Le Grange, a "philosophical requirement on how we ought to relate to the other or [what] our moral obligation is toward the other."[35] Since marriage always involves uniting two families, the practice and ethics of *botho/ubuntu* were at forefront of this union. Marriage among Batswana was also not an individual affair but reflected how the "communities involved shared their very existence in that reality and how they became one people, one thing." After all, Africans themselves would say that through their marriage, their families and clans are also united so that what is done to one of their members is done to all. In light of this gesture, marriage also means that the partners' responsibilities are not limited to themselves alone but have a much wider application. Their own personal identities and identifications are likewise extended.[36]

Marriage created mutual relationships between families. In Setswana communities, marriage was a system in which families came together and created "through marriage networks of alliance and support on both sides of the family."[37] For patrilineal families within the Tswana culture, the uncle of the bride was the person who played an important role in handling disputes within the family and also in marriage negotiations for his sister's sons."[38] In Setswana societies, everything possible was done to prepare people for marriage and to make them ready for the expectations of marriage. This included teaching that began during the initiation schools of *Bogwera* and *Bojale.*

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[33] Ibid.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Le Grange, *Ubuntu/Botho as Ecophilosophy*, 306.
[36] Kyalo, *A Reflection on the African*, 213.
[37] Ibid. .
[38] Denbow & Thebe, *Culture and Customs*, 136.

A discussion of three Setswana marital institutional practices of preparing to receive *ngwetsi* or the daughter-in-law follow. The practices are *Patlo* (a practice of seeking a woman's hand in marriage); *Bogadi* ("bride wealth" or *lobola*), and *Go laya* (a process of premarital ritual advice or counseling).[39]

II. 2a. *Patlo*

Patlo is a social process of negotiating or seeking the hand of a woman in marriage. Before a *Patlo* could proceed or be initiated, the man intending to marry had to make a choice of a wife. In pre-colonial times, among Setswana-speaking ethnic groups there were some practices and restrictions on the choice of a woman and the family into which a man could marry. He could marry his cousin, or *ntsala,* who happened to be the "daughter of a maternal uncle or a paternal aunt."[40] *Patlo* involved the negotiations that took place before betrothal was completed. The man's father would informally have a dialogue or conversation with the father of the woman his son intended to marry to establish some kind of relationship between the two families. After the fathers' meeting, a discussion about the possibility of marriage among close relatives would ensue. Maternal uncles (*bomalome*) were instrumental in the negotiations of *Patlo* or 'seeking' the woman from her parents. They approached the girl's parents through the following expression, *"Re tsile go kopa sego sametsi* (we have come to request a calabash [gourd] of water).[41] The metaphor of *'sego sa metsi'* or a gourd of water referred to the fact that a woman is linked with life-giving flowing water, and thus with fertility. Rhetorically the metaphor also designates her domestic role as one who will carry water from the well for her family. A successful *Patlo* ended with a betrothal. Once the betrothal was completed, Schapera asserts that the bridegroom's family would seal this agreement with a gift to the bride's family of an animal for slaughter. Once the bridegroom's people had sealed the negotiations with an animal gift, the rituals around the *Bogadi* (bride wealth) would proceed.

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[39] Sibonile E. Ellece, "Agency and Gender in Setswana Marriage Ceremonies: *Patlo* and *Go Laya* Rituals," *NJLC, 5* (1) (June, 2011): 45.

[40] Schapera, *A Handbook of Tswana Law*, 126.

[41] Schapera, *A Handbook of Tswana Law*, 131.

II.2b. Bogadi (*bride wealth*)

Bogadi was a practice of giving and accepting gifts before the marriage could be consummated. The major gift was the *bogadi* cattle. The number of cattle differed from one ethnic group to another, but the standard, according to Denbow and Thebe, was "between 8 and 10 cattle."[42] *Bogadi* is an important phenomenon in that it completed the marriage union. A marriage was solemnized and found legitimate through a "gift of cattle from the groom's family to the bride's family."[43] *Bogadi* was seen as an act of appreciation to the wife's parents for nurturing their daughter, not as the purchase of a wife as some have insinuated. Most importantly, it created and communicated a "special bond between the two family groups, just as the transfer of the cattle in other situations creates special relationships between chief and subject, or owner and herdsman... it was a practice in which the marriage became 'legitimate in the eyes of the public.'"[44] It was also functional, in that it provided for the younger children in the home of the bride. It also laid a solid foundation for the marriage in case "questions later arose about the position of the children within their father's lineage, their right to inheritance, and the rights to property on the part of the husband or wife if the marriage ended in divorce."[45]

The practice of *bogadi* highlights the dynamics of power. Power is essential to the maintenance of gender, especially to the patriarchal foundation of the culture of marriage. For example, the power dynamics at play in the *bogadi* practice were in the idea that *bogadi* was paid to place the woman "under the control of her husband, [and it] far more honoured his position in the tribe generally than a woman."[46] Furthermore, *bogadi* was key to the transfer of the "reproductive power of a woman from her own to that of her husband."[47]

II.2c. Go Laya *(Premarital Counseling)*

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[42] Denbow & Thebe, *Culture and Customs*, 137.
[43] Schapera, *A Handbook of Tswana Law*, 138-139.
[44] Denbow & Thebe, *Culture and Customs*, 136-137.
[45] Denbow & Thebe, *Culture and Customs,* 137.
[46] Schapera, *A Handbook of Tswana Law*, 128. [47] Ibid.

Go laya is premarital counseling of the woman and man about to be married. It is practiced by the bride or daughter-in-law's aunts, other married female relatives, and clan members. Whereas the groom was also counseled by his uncles and other married relatives, the process of '*go laya,*' according to Sibonile Ellece, was an "advice ritual" [48] and there was specific language used to "represent brides and grooms."[49] Ellece further holds that the representation of brides "contributes to unequal power relations in the family."[50] According to Ellece, the verbal advice brides received was produced and communicated within a patriarchal framework. This patriarchal framework is what Teresa Ebert articulates as "the organising and division of all practices and significations in terms of gender and the prevailing of one gender over the other."[51] These norms are explicitly present as a controlling ideological culture of marriage. They organize the marriage, its values, and other essentials, which will either play solely to the husband's values and/ or to those of the mother-in-law.

Ellece gives an example from Tshego's[52] wedding in Kanye. As a new bride, Tshego was counseled by her female relatives. In the pre-marital advice, and in the absence of her husband, she was told to die to herself by becoming a *seso* (fool) a word that has, according to Ellece, "the connotation of death, because it is derived from the verb 'swa' (die)."[53] One of the counselors said,

> When a man comes home in the evening, he should not find you out, in the night. And you are not supposed to sweep away the feet of your mother-in-law when she has come to see you. Tshego you see me my elder sister's daughter, be a fool like me. Tomorrow we should not hear that you have returned (from your marital home). Be a fool like me. Pula![54]

In other words, Tshego has to die to her needs, and possibly to her desires, and ignore her troubles. From now on, her desire is to be for her husband and the safe keeping of her marriage. She also has to act "stupid and

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[48] Ellece, *Agency and Gender*, 45.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Teresa Ebert, "The Romance of Patriarchy: Ideology, Subjectivity, and Postmodern Feminist Cultural Theory," *Cultural Critique* 10 (1988): 19.
[52] This not the actual name of the woman in our study.
[53] Ellece, *Agency and Gender*, 46.
[54] Ibid.

passive that she may as well be dead."[55] *Go Laya*, or the advice ceremony, communicates information about marriage as "experienced by a woman, as a series of duties that she has to perform and sacrifices she has to make."[56]

Ellece also explores the practice of '*Rutu*' a ritual chant performed at one of the weddings she attended. It was a gendered, ideological, verbal performance by the "female relatives of the groom."[57] *Rutu* is a performance practice of "advice" and it "articulates and places emphasis on the idea that a good wife is one who is accommodating, tolerant and silent... It was a "post-patlo (female version) celebration."[58] Chants which were highly gendered included: "*Mosadi ga a balebale*!" (A good wife is not talkative); *"Mosadi ga a tsamaye mo mafelong a di dirinki!"* (A good wife does not visit bars); *"Marutu he nnaka, marutu he nnaka!"* (Calm my younger one, calm my younger one! Calm! Be quiet and at peace).[59] Therefore, the *Rutu* chant is a practice of social and ideological enculturation in which patriarchal norms and prerogatives are enforced. Passive resistance is promoted as a major weapon by which a married woman can preserver her marriage. According to Ellece, a newly married woman was also strictly advised to cease friendship with the "company of unmarried girls and listening to gossip as this could lead her astray ("do not listen to hearsay about your husband's activities)"[60] She was also instructed not to associate with unmarried girls. Thus this performance was done to cement the patriarchal practice of marriage and solely to serve the interests of the husband while the wife remained passive.

II.3 *Ngwetsi Bona Matsalaatswale: When Mother-in-law Meets Daughter in Law*

In Botswana, like in most sub-Saharan countries, people in rural areas live in some form of extended family. Many of the Tswana traditional wedding songs project clear messages of the expectations of daughters-in-laws as they are introduced to the new family. Among the

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[55] Ibid.
[56] Ibid., 47.
[57] Ellece, *Agency and Gender*, 48.
[58] Ibid.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Ibid.

Bangwaketse tribe and, many other tribes in Botswana, a daughter-in-law is expected to relieve her mother-in-law of her domestic duties, such as cooking and fetching water. The following traditional Tswana song is normally sung at the wedding ceremonies and it highlights what is expected of the bride, namely, to perform domestic duties and relieve her mother-in-law of those duties. The song goes:

> *Heela Matsale (Mother-in-law!)*[61]
> *Heela Matsale, tlogela dipitsa tseo, (Mother-in-law, please leave those pots!)*
> *Mong wa tsone, Keyo o etla. (The owner of the pots has come!)*

This song simply asks the mother-in-law to stop cooking as the one who is to cook, the bride, has arrived. In short, the traditional Tswana society expects a daughter-in-law to serve not only her husband but also her mothers-in-law. O. S. Phibion[62] argues that traditional music such as the above song and others should be included in the current music syllabi for Botswana schools. He reckons that the inclusion of traditional music could help to transmit traditional, social, and cultural teachings of these songs. One of the songs for whose inclusion he advocates for is called, "*Nna matsale o a nthata keya nokeng ka galase.*" This song is found among the Bangwaketse ethnic group of Botswana. It is about a daughter-in-law who is delighted by her loving mother-in-law. The song goes, "My mother-in-law loves me, I go to fetch water with a glass!" The glass metaphor possibly suggests that a loved daughter-in-law is not overworked with carrying heavy water container; rather, she is treated with care and love. Sabalele[63] argues that some women have been mentally conditioned to think that being a daughter-in-law amounts to cooking, cleaning, doing laundry, and other household chores for the in-laws. According to Sabalele, "failure to do this may lead to divorce or polygamy."[64] The songs above highlight what is expected of daughters-in-law in patriarchal contexts of Seyswana cultures. It seems that new daughters-in-law do not

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[61] The songs discussed here are oral communal songs.

[62] O. S. Phibion, "Bangwaketse of Botswana Setapa Traditional Music Practices," in *International Review of Social Sciences and Humanities, 4* (1) (2012): 1-11.

[63] S. N. Sabalele, "A traumatic experience faced by the second wife in a polygamous marriage: A challenge to pastoral care," an interview by Sabalele with Rev. Unazo Uhona (10 November 2015).

[64] Ibid., 50.

have much authority in deciding how to exist in the new home, since the expectations dictate how they should behave. The songs also allude to the tensions that are to be expected between the daughters-in-law and the mothers-in-law.

The type of family organization that had just been described, as well as the family values associated with it, is subjected to continuous challenges. One of the major challenges as described by J. Livingston[65] is rural-urban movement. According to Livingston, Botswana, whose economy was largely based on agriculture, experienced massive droughts in the 1980s and the agricultural sector had never recovered. This condition led many, especially the young people, to migrate to cities so as to provide for their families back in the villages. Young women also moved. They would work as domestic workers and would also engage in drought relief duties. Livingston argues that young women were then able to exercise their power over their mothers-in-law because their wages were central to household viability and growth. In short, urban migration and 'cash power' became a source of negotiation between mothers and daughters-in-law. Older women as a result could no longer fully exercise their authority over their daughters-in-law and the whole household.

Livingston also emphasizes that while the young wives are working in urban areas, mothers-in-law would be taking care of the grandchildren in the villages. However, because of urban challenges, wives may lose their jobs. As a result, some women would not want to go home because there is no money. This is problematic, for the children need not only their mother's money but also their mother's presence, love, and warmth. In addition, daughters-in-law also need the moral support of their mothers-in-law during such straining times. Treating oneself as a functional entity in the urban space therefore leads to the neglect of other factors, such as emotions.

As a way of curbing conflicts between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, some people advocate for the re-instatement of cousin marriages mentioned above. Rev. Unazo Uhona,[66] the Evangelical Lutheran Church Minister who belongs to the Herero tribe in Sehithwa village, mentioned that the Herero, Yei, and Mbukushu tribes encourage people not to intermarry, or marry people outside their clan. As a matter

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[65] J. Livingston, *Debility and the Moral Imagination in Botswana* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2005).

[66] Sabalele, *An interview with Rev. Unazo Uhona.*

of fact, they are encouraged to marry their cousins for the simple reason that the daughter-in-law would take care of the mother-in-law as she would her own mother. Uhona emphasized that cousin marriages somehow decrease the conflict between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law and bring more stability to the family. Uhona also maintained that cousin marriages benefited women, young and old. Families became even more united because they were not strangers to each other. If a man is married to his cousin, his cousin would naturally and without hesitation take care of the mother-in-law.

Although the cousin marriage practice is specific to some ethnic lines, it is more effective in bringing families together, for it minimizes cultural clashes. Daughters-in-law are expected to render traditional services to their mothers-in-laws because the belief is that there are no biological or cultural boundaries. The traditional African family life thrived on the extended family. This was and still is a good model of family because one could and can at all times count on the family for support when in need. However, today women and men need to combine their efforts to care of their families. Although the culture dictates that *mosadi* (a Setswana word for "the one who stays at home") is the one to look after the children and household, in today's context women, educated or not, have careers and more responsibilities. The challenge remains: how can daughters-in-law maintain stability in the family and at the same time continue to satisfy family functions? Perhaps such a question can be answered by investigating urban-based bridal showers and the peer-counseling that occurs—which will be the second part of this research, to be published in a follow-up paper.

III. *Botsetse:* Receiving a New Baby and Caring for the Mother

While there are no equivalent traces of contemporary baby showers among Botswana traditional communities, Batswana have a series of specific taboos to ensure the safety of a pregnancy, all of which promote *botho/ubuntu*. For example, James Amanze observes that: "A pregnant woman is not allowed to have sex with another man except her husband or the person who made her pregnant. The same applies to the man who made her pregnant. He is not expected to go about having sexual intercourse with other women because this will affect the health of the

baby."[67] Although this taboo is meant to protect the baby, it also reinforces *botho/ubuntu* by fostering faithfulness and preventing emotional trauma for the pregnant woman. Many of the pregnancy-related taboos reinforce the spirit of *botho/ubuntu*, since they reflect caring attitudes. For example, a pregnant woman's strenuous chores are reduced considerably to ensure that she rests and to safeguard the baby. Besides ensuring the safety of the baby, such a taboo reflects the spirit of *botho/ubuntu* by considering the physical needs of the pregnant woman. Some of the taboos, such as those forbidding the pregnant woman from eating fat or skin from under the belly of a cow, eating eggs, wearing a belt, crossing the imprint of a snake on the ground, and drinking water whilst standing, amongst others, are mainly for the safety of the mother-to-be and the unborn baby.[68] Whilst such taboos may seemingly not relate to *botho/ubuntu,* they do all seek to ensure the safety of the baby and the mother.

Preparations for the forthcoming baby thus include caring for the expectant mother, who is treated with care and advised accordingly. As the African saying goes, "it takes a village to raise a child." Thus the arrival of a baby is marked by community members bringing gifts for the child. The arrival of the baby is also marked by the practice of *go baya botsetse.* In the latter, the nursing mother and new child are closed away in the nursery room in seclusion for three months, where an assisting elderly woman attends them on a twenty-four hour basis. The attendant elderly woman washes and massages the new mother to ease the stress of carrying a baby for nine months; cooks for her; washes the baby, gives it to the mother for feeding, and takes care of the baby when it cries. She also monitors and restricts the entrance into nursery lest the new child is exposed to infections. These processes also make sure that the father does not deprive the new child of quality time with her/his mother. The concept of *botsetse* underlines that the nursing mother must rest and give undivided attention to the baby for a period of three months, before she can resume her normal duties in the public space. The end of *botsetse* after three month period is marked by an outdoor ceremony, in which the name of the child is publicly announced to the community. In urban Botswanan settings, baby showers have become a big movement or social event, which begin to prepare the future mother just before the arrival of the baby. Organizing

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[67] James Amanze, *African Traditional Religions and Culture in Botswana* (Gaborone: Pula Press, 2002), 135.

[68] Amanze, *African Traditional Religions.*

members invite participants and contribute an agreed amount of money that is used to buy baby furniture, clothes, blankets, utensils, diapers, gift vouchers, and food in preparation for the forthcoming baby shower. The shower includes praying for the forthcoming baby, public counseling on mothering, as well as sharing wisdom on the joys and challenges of parenting. It would seem that *botho/ubuntu* continues to drive the movement behind baby showers, yet it remains to be established whether they also re-invent the tradition away from patriarchal expectations.

IV. Conclusion

The *botho/ubuntu* ethic and spirituality builds community and seeks to empower all members of the community to live dignified lives. The investigation of marriage preparations and the reception of *ngwetsi*; the hospitality of the *matsale* (mother-in-law), and the welcoming of a new baby and care of the nursing mother (*go baya botsetse*) highlight the *botho/ubuntu* ethic of caring, welcoming, affirming, and respecting the other. The role of women is central to the practices of *botho/ubuntu* spirituality, since it is rooted in welcoming, affirming, and respecting the Other. *Botho/ubuntu* activities and spirituality, therefore, have the potential for providing a feminist space of affirming and caring for human life, as the above examined cases demonstrate. The examined cases, however, indicate that *botho/ubuntu* co-exists with patriarchy, which creates and maintains gender inequalities. While *go laya,* for example, is a good practice of giving the new bride tips on maintaining a good marriage, it also reinforces patriarchal norms, which can be destructive to the well-being of the woman. A question might be asked of how women are using the *botho/ubuntu* ethic and spirituality to create a space of self-empowerment and the empowerment of others in the urban space. Do Botswana women make any attempt to rewrite patriarchal norms in their own spaces? One place to look is the bridal, baby, Naomi, and Laban showers that have become popular in the urban spaces of Botswana. How do the urban-based *botho/ubuntu*-informed activities such as bridal and baby showers construct, reconstruct, and deconstruct gender? Such showers are also largely female-centered movements, which women organize to empower themselves and their communities. Consequently, subsequent fieldwork will be undertaken to investigate how Batswana women use *Botho/Ubuntu* to empower others and themselves, and how they might be rewriting the patriarchal script in the process. The data

collected will indicate how showers may be used as a space for women's agency and subversion of patriarchy.

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