

Masenya (Ngwana' Mphahlele)'s Cultural (Re-)turn within South African Biblical Studies: Intersecting 'Culture' and 'Racial Capitalism'

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ABSTRACT

In honouring the biblical studies work of Madipoane Masenya (Ngwana' Mphahlele), my article situates Masenya within the debates in South African Black Theology on 'culture' in the 1980s. This is the period Masenya began her formal biblical studies work, forging a distinctive cultural emphasis both within South African (largely White) Old Testament studies and an emerging African Biblical Interpretation/ Hermeneutics/ Studies. The particular focus of my article is on how Masenya's (re-)turn to culture, intersected with the dominant race and/ as class analysis of Black Theology in the 1980s and how Masenya's work has over more than four decades intersected culture with gender as well as with multiple other systemic realities. My article places Masenya's work alongside the related work of the Ujamaa Centre for Community Development and Research, for both have sought to intersect 'culture' and 'racial capitalism' and both have sought to serve ordinary African women with their biblical praxis. The article uses Masenya's and the Ujamaa Centre's pivotal work on Job to illustrate how socially engaged biblical scholarship heeds the summons of local African communities to serve their lived realities.

KEYWORDS: Cultural Turn, Culture, Racial Capitalism, Madipoane Masenya, Biblical Studies

A INTRODUCTION

Among the debates taking place in South African Black Theology in the late 1970s and early 1980s was how to understand the relationship between race and class. In his contribution, the opening essay, to the collection of essays in *The Unquestionable Right to Be Free: Essays in Black Theology*, which established the agenda of "Phase II" Black Theology,¹ Lebamang Sebidi provides an incisive

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¹ Mokgethi Motlhabi, "Introduction," in *The Unquestionable Right to Be Free: Essays in Black Theology* (ed. Itumeleng J. Mosala and Buti Tlhagale; Johannesburg:

analysis of these interlocking systems, suggesting the phrase "racial capitalism" to describe the intersection of these systems.² "South Africa," argues Sebidi, "is both a racial oligarchy as well as a capitalist society. But the two do not run parallel; they are mixed and intertwined."³ Sebidi's seminal essay not only identifies the two central realities that shaped Black Theology—race and class—but it also conceptualises their intersection, racial capitalism. "The struggle"⁴ was against "the system,"⁵ with a clear recognition that "the system" was a compound noun, incorporating "interrelated" or "intertwined"⁶ or "interlocking"⁷ or "intersecting"⁸ systems of oppression. Each of these metaphors and their bodies of theory understand that "oppression is not a singular process or a binary political relation, but is better understood as constituted by multiple, converging, or interwoven systems."⁹

While race and class were understood as the primary distinctive features of the Black struggle, both culture and gender were recognised as related, interlocking realities of Black history and struggle. Itumeleng Mosala, writing in the same collection of foundational essays on Black Theology, frames the question of African culture within the history of capitalism. Citing Michael McKale's incisive analysis, in which he argues that people only become radical when they perceive "the moral contradiction between their own culture and history and the culture and history of capitalism which is imposed on them,"¹⁰ Mosala goes on to state:

Skotaville, 1986), xv.

² Lebamang Sebidi, "The Dynamics of the Black Struggle and Its Implications for Black Theology," in *The Unquestionable Right to Be Free: Essays in Black Theology* (ed. Itumeleng J. Mosala and Buti Tlhagale; Johannesburg: Skotaville Publishers, 1986), 31.

³ Sebidi, "The Dynamics of the Black Struggle," 31.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁵ Albert Nolan, *God in South Africa: The Challenge of the Gospel* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1988), 157.

⁶ Sebidi, "The Dynamics of the Black Struggle," 31, 32.

⁷ Combahee River Collective, "The Combahee River Collective Statement," *WSQ* 42 3/4 (1977): 271.

⁸ Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *UCLF* 1 (1989).

⁹ Anna Carastathis, "The Concept of Intersectionality in Feminist Theory," *Philosophy Compass* 9/5 (2014): 304; see also Anna Carastathis, "Interlocking Systems of Oppression," in *Critical Concepts in Queer Studies and Education: An International Guide for the Twenty-First Century* (ed. Nelson M. Rodriguez et al.; London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 161–171.

¹⁰ Michael McKale, "Culture and Human Liberation," *Radical Religion: A Quarterly Journal of Critical Thought* 2 (1980), 5-15; cited in Itumeleng J. Mosala, "The Relevance of African Traditional Religions and Their Challenge to Black Theology,"

The point must be made unequivocally, therefore, without creating the impression that all elements of African traditional culture and religion are progressive and relevant for contemporary society, that without a creative reappropriation of traditional African religions and societies both African and black theologies will build their houses on sand. A Black Theology of liberation must draw its cultural hermeneutics of struggle from a critical reappropriation of black culture just as an African theology must arm itself with the political hermeneutics that arise from the contemporary social struggles of black people under apartheid capitalism.¹¹

During this same formative period for Black Theology, the "Forum on Christianity in the Southern African Context" was held at Rhodes University, Grahamstown/ Makhanda, at the end of January 1985. There, a central concern was the relationship between Black Theology and African Theology and between the Missionary-Settler Initiated Churches and the African Initiated/ Independent Churches. Among the papers presented, in what was a formative moment among South African Christians in terms of both theology and liturgical practice,¹² Buti Tlhagale engaged with "Culture in an Apartheid Society."¹³

Tlhagale offered an incisive analysis of the shift from an initial settler-colonial-apartheid "cultural monism," in which Africans were to be delivered by missionaries and their churches from their "pagan world" and assimilated into European culture, to a "cultural pluralism," in which "adoption and integration into western culture soon ceased to be the ideal."¹⁴ Tlhagale explains why, arguing that "the civilising mission" destabilised the "material and political interests of the dominant groups."¹⁵ "Enculturation" threatened not only the cultural identity of the dominant groups, but also their political dominance. "And so the only One History was to be replaced by 'ethnic' histories."¹⁶ Tlhagale explains how within the system of 'apartheid,' notions of 'culture' were used to legitimate and sustain the system:

The cultural assets of other groupings were deemed worthy of consideration because they could be used to the advantage of the dominant groups. The customs, beliefs and languages of indigenous people were no longer 'pagan' and undesirable but would now be

in *The Unquestionable Right to Be Free: Essays in Black Theology* (ed. Itumeleng J. Mosala and Buti Tlhagale; Johannesburg: Skotaville, 1986), 99.

¹¹ Mosala, "The Relevance of African Traditional Religions," 99.

¹² John W. de Gruchy, "Editorial," *JTSA* 51 (1985): 3–4; John W. de Gruchy, "Christians in Conflict: The Social Reality of the South African Church," *JTSA* 51 (1985): 16–26.

¹³ Buti Tlhagale, "Culture in an Apartheid Society," *JTSA* 51 (1985): 27–36.

¹⁴ Tlhagale, "Culture in an Apartheid Society," 28.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 28.

allowed to develop and embody the 'national' aspirations of the different ethnic groupings.¹⁷

What Tlhagale's nuanced analysis offered was a distinctive place for culture, alongside economics, in Black Theology's understanding of the South African struggle. "Perhaps," he says somewhat tentatively, "we could therefore bracket, at least temporarily, the almost dogmatic phrase of Marx and Engels – that 'in the final analysis,' it is the economic base that determines social reality."¹⁸ For both Whites and Africans, an economic "reductionism" should not be used, he argues, in "an explaining of ethnic-cultural issues."¹⁹ "In spite of the devastating impact of Western culture, and in spite of the calculated reasons for which the apartheid regime seeks the preservation of ethnic identities," Tlhagale writes at the time, "African culture continues to survive with a remarkable force."²⁰

Speaking to a forum in the mid-1980s which brought together significant 'African' representation from both the Missionary-Settler Initiated Churches and the African Initiated/ Independent Churches (AICs), Tlhagale reminds those gathered: "The values and meaning embedded in the African symbol system continue to dominate the African worldview much more radically than what meets the eye. The Christian practice, its ritual and symbol system are far from replacing the deeply rooted 'African way' of perceiving the terrestrial and the spiritual."²¹ Addressing Africans from within the Missionary-Settler Initiated Churches directly, Tlhagale concludes: "What the advocates of indigenisation/ acculturation movement are pleading for, is the public emergence of the African forms of being."²²

This summons to a public form of African cultural reality and identity was met by an immediate liturgical transformation within the Forum, with church leaders from the AICs inviting those from the Missionary-Settler Churches to inhabit their 'authentic Africanness' (*"l'authenticite africaine"*).²³ Tlhagale's challenge went beyond this immediate liturgical transformation, for he left us with the following task: "The question is, can culture be cast into a creative mould ... that give meaning and direction to the diverse population groups of South Africa?"²⁴

This question would be answered decisively, indirectly by the Ujamaa Centre for Community Development and Research and directly by Madipoane

¹⁷ Ibid., 29.

¹⁸ Ibid., 31.

¹⁹ Ibid., 31.

²⁰ Ibid., 35–36.

²¹ Ibid., 36.

²² Ibid., 36.

²³ Ibid., 36.

²⁴ Ibid., 33.

Masenya (Ngwana' Mphahlele). In honouring the biblical studies work of Madipoane Masenya (Ngwana' Mphahlele), my article situates Masenya within the debates in South African Black Theology concerning 'culture' in the 1980s. This is the period when Masenya began her formal biblical studies work, forging a distinctive cultural emphasis both within South African (largely White) Old Testament studies and an emerging African Biblical Interpretation/Hermeneutics/ Studies. The particular focus of my article is on how Masenya's (re-)turn to culture intersected with the dominant race and/ as class analysis of Black Theology in the 1980s and how Masenya's work has over more than four decades intersected culture with gender and then with multiple other systemic realities. My article places Masenya's work alongside the related work of the Ujamaa Centre for Community Development and Research, for both have sought to intersect 'culture' and 'racial capitalism' and both have sought to serve ordinary African women with their biblical praxis. The article uses Masenya's and the Ujamaa Centre's pivotal work on Job to illustrate how socially engaged biblical scholarship heeds the summons of local African communities to serve their lived realities.

In the next section of the article, I reflect on how what is now the Ujamaa Centre was regularly summoned to engage with African cultural realities, even though the Ujamaa Centre's primary ideological and theological orientation was distinctively shaped by the political-economic orientation of South African Black Theology and South African Contextual Theology. Cultural realities always asserted themselves, which is the distinctive contribution of Masenya, as I then go on to demonstrate within her distinctive 'cultural' contribution.

B THE CULTURAL SUMMONS (THE UJAMAA CENTRE)

Missionary-colonial Settler Initiated Churches—the so-called 'Mainline' churches—had tended to adopt a denigrating position toward African culture, while African Initiated/ Independent Churches (AICs) resolutely affirmed the integral reality of African culture within their particular form of African Christianity. The Ujamaa Centre was constituted by each of these traditions of African Christianity through their engagements with the anti-apartheid liberation struggle.

The 'political' was the Ujamaa Centre's primary site of struggle but the 'cultural' always asserted itself, demanding intersectional Contextual Bible Study (CBS) engagement. Indeed, in our earliest summative CBS resource, *Contextual Bible Study*,²⁵ we include a chapter on "African Critical Resources for Reading" in which we intersect the political realities of racial capitalism with the cultural realities of missionary-colonial knowledge systems. Our focus is on African indigenous readings of the Joseph Story (Gen 37–50) and of the ancestral

²⁵ Gerald O. West, *Contextual Bible Study* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1993).

genealogy of Jesus in Luke 3:23–38, each of which summarised extensive work with actual local organised groups of African interpreters.²⁶ We have characterised this kind of political-cultural intersection, whereby ordinary Africans interpret the Bible for themselves, as a form of ‘indigenous,’ ‘neo-indigenous’ or ‘vernacular’ biblical interpretation.²⁷

Though always attentive to the cultural summons, our CBS work usually intersects the cultural with the (political and/ as) economic. Indeed, our understanding of specifically ‘decolonial’ forms of biblical interpretation must include the intersection of the cultural with the economic.²⁸ What distinguishes the contribution of Madipoane Masenya (Ngwana’ Mphahlele) is how she constitutes the ‘cultural’ as ‘political.’ I now turn to Masenya (Ngwana’ Mphahlele)’s distinctive contribution.

C THE CULTURAL IMPERATIVE (MADIPOANE MASENYA (NGWANA’ MPHAHLELE))

Madipoane Masenya (Ngwana’ Mphahlele) has demonstrated just how, within the discipline of biblical studies (and beyond its boundaries), culture can be cast into a creative mould. Shaped in part by these African Theology and Black Theology conversations, Masenya pioneered a particular cultural contribution, heeding the summons of her own Africanness and the Africanness of her sister-interlocutors. Adopting what was then, in the late 1980s, the most substantive African biblical interpretation theory, a postcolonial comparative approach,²⁹

²⁶ See, for example, Gerald O. West, “Difference and Dialogue: Reading the Joseph Story with Poor and Marginalized Communities in South Africa,” *Biblical Interpretation* 2 (1994): 152–170. For similar work on Matt 1:1–18, see Gerald O. West, “Mobilizing Matthew among the Marginalized: Thirty Years of Community-Based Bible Study in South Africa,” *CTM* 49/4 (2022): 28–29. For related work on Luke 9:28–36, see Gerald O. West, *The Academy of the Poor: Towards a Dialogical Reading of the Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999; repr., Cluster Publications, Pietermaritzburg, 2003), 114–117.

²⁷ Gerald O. West, “Local Is Lekker, but Ubuntu Is Best: Indigenous Reading Resources from a South African Perspective,” in *Vernacular Hermeneutics* (ed. R.S. Sugirtharajah; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 37–51; Gerald O. West, “Indigenous Exegesis: Exploring the Interface between Missionary Methods and the Rhetorical Rhythms of Africa; Locating Local Reading Resources in the Academy,” *Neotestamentica* 36 (2002): 147–162; Gerald O. West, “Indigenous Biblical Hermeneutics: Voicing Continuity and Distinctiveness,” in *Postcolonial Perspectives in African Biblical Interpretations* (ed. Musa W. Dube, Andrew M. Mbuvi, and Dora R. Mbuwayesango; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), 85–96.

²⁸ Gerald O. West, “A Decolonial (Re)Turn to Class in South African Biblical Scholarship,” *OTE* 34/2 (2021): 532–555.

²⁹ Justin S. Ukpong, “Rereading the Bible with African Eyes,” *JTSA* 91 (1995): 3–14; Justin S. Ukpong, “Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Africa: Historical and Hermeneutical Directions,” in *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories and*

Masenya brought Old Testament proverbs and Northern Sotho proverbs into comparative conversation,³⁰ for the purposes of South African contextual change. I have added this final phrase because Masenya's work has always been about contextual change, whether change in her own Northern Sotho community,³¹ change in her church,³² change in South African and Euro-American biblical studies³³ and change within the institutions where she worked and practised her scholarship.³⁴ Contextual change has been most apparent in her intersectional work, where her primary interrogation has been of the interlocking systems of culture and gender. Her 'bosadi' corpus of work is a significant theoretical contribution in this regard,³⁵ as she reconceptualised the work being done on proverbial sayings within African biblical studies,³⁶ situating proverbial culture within a gender frame.

Even more significantly, Masenya's primary culture-gender intersection has been brought into engagement with other social systems shaping the South African context. She has heard and heeded the summons of local African communities and their realities. Perhaps the most substantive of these social

Trends (ed. Gerald O. West and Musa Dube; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2000), 11–28.

³⁰ See, for example, Madipoane J. Masenya, "In the School of Wisdom: An Interpretation of Some Old Testament Proverbs in a Northern Sotho Context," *OTE* 4/2 (1991): 171–191.

³¹ Cf. Madipoane Masenya, "Proverbs 31:10-31 in a South African Context: A Reading for the Liberation of African (Northern Sotho) Women," *Semeia* 78 (1997): 55–68.

³² Cf. Joyce (Madipoane) Masenya, "Freedom in Bondage: Black Feminist Hermeneutics," *JBTS* 8/1 (1994), 35–48.

³³ See, for example, Madipoane (Ngwana Mphahlele) Masenya, "Teaching Western-Oriented Old Testament Studies to African Students: An Exercise in Wisdom or in Folly?," *OTE* 17/3 (2004); Madipoane Masenya, "An African Methodology for South African Biblical Sciences: Revisiting the Bosadi (Womanhood) Approach," *OTE* 18/3 (2005): 741–751.

³⁴ Cf. Madipoane (Ngwan'a Mphahlele) Masenya and Hulisani Ramantswana, "Anything New under the Sun of South African Old Testament Scholarship? African Qoheleths' Review of *OTE* 1994-2010," *OTE* 25 (2012): 598–637; Madipoane Masenya (Ngwana' Mphahlele), "For Ever Trapped? An African Voice on Insider/Outsider Dynamics within South African Old Testament Gender-Sensitive Frameworks," *OTE* 27/1 (2014): 189–204.

³⁵ Cf. Madipoane Masenya, "A *Bosadi* (Womanhood) Reading of Proverbs 31:10-31," in *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible* (ed. Musa W. Dube; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001), 145–157; Masenya, "An African Methodology," 741–751

³⁶ Friedemann W. Golka, *The Leopard's Spots: Biblical and African Wisdom in Proverbs* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993); John Mbiti, "The Gospel and African Culture: Use and Unuse of Proverbs in African Theology," (Consultation on African Proverbs and Christian Mission, Maputo, 27-31 March, 1995); John Mbiti, "The African Proverbs Project and after," *Lexikos* 12 (2002): 256–263.

systems has been the interlocking retributive epistemologies and theologies associated with HIV and AIDS.³⁷ The interlocking systems which have sustained the stigmatisation of people living with HIV are colonial and African intersecting patriarchies,³⁸ African religio-cultural epistemologies with respect to God, the ancestors and witchcraft³⁹ as well as Christian and Islamic theologies with respect to theologies of retribution.⁴⁰ A common epistemology connecting these interlocking systems are forms of retributive epistemology; simply put: what you sow you will reap; in Old Testament terms, "those who plow iniquity and those who sow trouble harvest it" (Job 4:8); in New Testament terms, "the wages of sin is death" (Rom 6:23a).

Masenya, along with many African biblical and theological scholars,⁴¹ turned to Job as a dialogue partner.⁴² Significantly, within her substantive corpus of scholarship on Job, Masenya has made a distinctive contribution, using her gendered-cultural perspective 'to talk back' to Job, summoning Job to account in much the same way as Job summons God (and his friends) to account, following the trajectory of Elsa Tamez's "A Letter to Job."⁴³ It is this work of Masenya's, which gives priority to the voices of ordinary African women, to which I turn in the next section of the article.

³⁷ Cf. Madipoane Masenya (Ngwana' Mphahlele), "The Bible, HIV/AIDS and African-South African Women: A Bosadi (Womanhood) Perspective," *SHE* 31/1 (2005), 187-201.

³⁸ Ngozi C. Mbonu, Bart Van den Borne, and Nanne K. De Vries, "Stigma of People with HIV/AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Literature Review," *JTM* 2009 (2009): 5, 10-11; Nyokabi Kamau, "African Cultures and Gender in the Context of HIV and AIDS," in *Religion and HIV and AIDS: Charting the Terrain* (ed. Beverley Haddad; Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2011), 257-272.

³⁹ Mbonu, Van den Borne, and De Vries, "Stigma of People with HIV/AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa," 4-5; Ezra Chitando, "African Traditional Religions and HIV and AIDS: Exploring the Boundaries," in *Religion and HIV and AIDS: Charting the Terrain* (ed. Beverley Haddad; Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2011), 237-253.

⁴⁰ Mbonu, Van den Borne, and De Vries, "Stigma of People with HIV/AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa," 5; Farid Esack and Sarah Chiddy, eds., *Islam and AIDS: Between Scorn, Pity and Justice* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009); Gerald O. West, "Sacred Texts, Particularly the Bible and the Qur'an, and HIV and AIDS: Charting the Textual Territory," in *Religion and HIV and AIDS: Charting the Terrain* (ed. Beverley G. Haddad; Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2011).

⁴¹ West, "Sacred Texts and HIV and AIDS," 149-151.

⁴² Cf. Madipoane Masenya, "Between Unjust Suffering and the 'Silent' God: Job and HIV/AIDS Sufferers in South Africa," *Missionalia* 29 (2001): 186-199.

⁴³ Elsa Tamez, "A Letter to Job," in *New Eyes for Reading: Biblical and Theological Reflections by Women from the Third World* (ed. John S. Pobee and Bärbel von Wartenberg-Potter; Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1986), 50-52.

D JOB 3 AS A PROBLEMATIC PATRIARCHAL LITURGICAL RESOURCE

Just as the Ujamaa Centre has recognised the liturgical capacity of Job 3 in the midst of the HIV pandemic in the 1990s and early 2000s,⁴⁴ so too has Masenya (Ngwana' Mphahlele), invoking a fictional ordinary reader, Mmanape, as her co-narrator, who re-reads Job's lament in Job 3 from an African women's perspective.⁴⁵ Mmanape returns to Job, a book she knows, re-reading it in an interrogative mode when her son dies suddenly in a car crash.⁴⁶ Through Mmanape, Masenya asks an incisive question, probing to what extent Job's lament is gendered. Mmanape recognises that Job's lament is directed "mainly at his mother's womb."⁴⁷ Following the poetic plot of Job 3, Mmanape "concludes that the 'womb' that is primarily under attack in that chapter is neither that of the night nor that of Mother earth. It is the womb of a female human being,"⁴⁸ Job's mother. As an African woman, Mmanape is distressed at "what she perceives to be an attack on female reproductive anatomy."⁴⁹ And "[a]s though that were not enough, Job, the frustrated and angry attacks his mother's thighs and breasts!"⁵⁰

"Mmanape cannot but be disturbed," concludes Masenya, for in her view, "Job's misogyny is revealed" in this lament.⁵¹ Job's lament, she concludes, "may not be useful for (African) women who struggle with various losses, in particular, the loss their children." "In her view," she continues, "such women are likely to end his-lament more pained than they were before they begun to read it."⁵²

In this essay, Masenya invokes the quest for an appropriate African and biblical liturgical lament of African Christian women, who find more questions than answers in Job 3. Throughout Mmanape's interrogation of Job 3, she uses

⁴⁴ Gerald O. West and Bongi Zengele, "Reading Job 'Positively' in the Context of HIV/AIDS in South Africa," *Concilium* 4 (2004): 112–124; Gerald O. West, "The Poetry of Job as a Resource for the Articulation of Embodied Lament in the Context of HIV and AIDS in South Africa," in *Lamentations in Ancient and Contemporary Cultural Contexts* (ed. Nancy C. Lee and Carleen Mandolfo; Atlanta: SBL, 2008), 195–214.

⁴⁵ Madipoane Masenya (Ngwana' Mphahlele), "Her Appropriation of Job's Lament? Her-Lament of Job 3, from an African Story-Telling Perspective," in *Postcolonial Perspectives in African Biblical Interpretations* (ed. Musa W. Dube, Andrew M. Mbuvi, and Dora Mbuwayesango; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), 283–297.

⁴⁶ Masenya (Ngwana' Mphahlele), "Her Appropriation of Job's Lament?" 285.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 287.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 288.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 290.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 294.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 294.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 296.

African indigenous proverbial wisdom as resource to grapple with biblical wisdom, though the primary critique is shaped by gender analysis.

In a later companion article,⁵³ Masenya returns to Job 3, again invoking an ordinary African woman reader as her guide, Mmago Monotela. What is distinctive about this second article is that Masenya adds an ecological perspective to her culture-gender intersection, what she refers to as "an *eco-bosadi* lens."⁵⁴ As a Northern Sotho woman, Mmago Monotela understands the relationship between woman, birth and Mother Earth.⁵⁵ She recognises that she "cannot exist apart from earth. This is a woman who has through the years been taught to listen and hear earth's voice(s)."⁵⁶ Having been constituted by an African indigenous understanding of Earth, Mmago Monotela discerns three related areas of concern in Job 3:

- The subjection of female anatomy by the male protagonist of the text.
- The subjection of some elements of nature (cf. Job's incantations/curses).
- The summoning of wombs (the human womb and the womb of Mother Earth) to serve the male agenda.⁵⁷

Both Mmanape and Mmago Monotela question the liturgical usefulness of Job's lament in Job 3, particularly for women. Unlike these two sisters, the women of the Siyaphila support groups the Ujamaa Centre worked with were not probing Job 3 primarily from a gender or even a cultural perspective. They engaged Job 3 as a lament of protest and resistance to the dominant retributive epistemologies and theologies that afflicted their HIV positive lives, driving them out from their families, their churches and their communities and, even in moments, from themselves.⁵⁸

⁵³ The above essay was first published in 2009; for the reference, see Masenya (Ngwana' Mphahlele), "Her Appropriation of Job's Lament?" 283, notes.

⁵⁴ Madipoane Masenya (Ngwana' Mphahlele), "All from the Same Source? Deconstructing a (Male) Anthropocentric Reading of Job (3) through an *Eco-Bosadi* Lens," *JTSA* 137 (2010): 46-60. Masenya (Ngwana' Mphahlele) offers in this article a useful summary of her '*bosadi*' approach; see Masenya (Ngwana' Mphahlele), "All from the Same Source?" 55-57.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁵⁸ Gerald O. West, "Between Text and Trauma: Reading Job with People Living with HIV," in *Bible through the Lens of Trauma* (ed. Elizabeth C. Boase and Frechette Christopher G.; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016), 203-205; Gerald O. West, "Senzeni Na? Speaking of God, 'What Is Right' and the 'Re-Turn' of the Stigmatising Community in the Context of HIV," *Scriptura* 116/2 (2017): 260-277.

However, another group of ordinary African women would probe the Ujamaa Centre's cultural interpretation of Job 3, asking if its liturgical form would serve their need for a liturgy of still-born burial.

E JOB 3 AS A WOMEN'S CULTURAL BURIAL LITURGICAL RESOURCE

Through the Ujamaa Centre's work with Job 3 with the Siyaphila networks of people living with HIV⁵⁹ as well as through Masenya's work on Job 3 with her two ordinary reader companions, I have regularly returned to this text, enabled by this array of ordinary readers and socially engaged scholars to discern textual detail that I have missed in earlier readings. Regularly re-reading Job 3 with this kind of interpretive company, I have been reminded of a conversation from the late 1980s with the women of the Funda Wenza community-based project within the community of Amawoti, an informal peri-urban shack settlement on the outskirts of Durban/eThekweni.⁶⁰

The Ujamaa Centre worked for many years from the late 1980s in the Amawoti informal settlement with two local organisations: Funda Wenza, a women's group (with links to the Ilimo Community Project) and the Amawoti Ministers Organisation (AMO), an association of ministers from various AICs. One of the themes discussed and workshopped with participants from these organisations had to do with women and leadership. The text of 1 Tim 2:8–15,⁶¹ along with a number of other texts (for example, Mark 5:21–6:1),⁶² were workshopped using the CBS method. The women were empowered by our resistant re-reading of the 1 Timothy text which was usually used to silence and subordinate women within their various AICs. Significantly, one of the areas among many in which the women felt empowered was in the creation, though CBS reflection, of relevant women-related liturgical innovation, for use within their own organisations like Funda Wenza and within their AIC institutions.

On one Saturday after our regular workshop, some of the Funda Wenza women asked if the Ujamaa Centre could offer biblical resources for what was considered women's religious work within their AICs: the burying of stillborn children. Once a child was born and subsequently died while still a child, traditional AIC men-led burial practices were followed. However, if a child was

⁵⁹ Bongzi P. Zengele, "The Lived and Embodied Theologies of People Living with HIV and AIDS: A Phenomenological Study of Siyaphila Support Groups for PLHIV in Kwazulu Natal, South Africa" (Ph.D. Diss., University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2023).

⁶⁰ Graham Philpott, *Jesus Is Tricky and God Is Undemocratic: The Kin-Dom of God in Amawoti* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1993), 19.

⁶¹ Gerald O. West, "Taming Texts of Terror: Reading (against) the Gender Grain of 1 Timothy," *Scriptura* 86 (2004): 166.

⁶² Malika Sibeko and Beverley G. Haddad, "Reading the Bible 'with' Women in Poor and Marginalized Communities in South Africa (Mark 5:21-6:1)," *Semeia* 78 (1997: 83–92).

stillborn, the task was left to women to bury the child. The women of Funda Wenza wanted to know from us if we could advise them on a biblical text that might be used within the liturgical practice they usually used to bury stillborn children.

We reflected on their question then and for weeks and years afterwards, until our work within the community came to an end. We were not at that time able to offer them guidance with respect to an appropriate biblical text. However, we regularly affirmed them in their women-led liturgical leadership role as they buried the stillborn children of their community.

It was not until the advent of HIV returned us to the book of Job that we found what could be considered a potentially useful text—Job 3:16.⁶³ Within the second stanza (11–19),⁶⁴ following the metaphors which trouble both Mmanape and Mmago Monotela, we find Job imagining not dying as a “new-born” (3:11) but as a “stillborn child” (3:16).⁶⁵ Indeed, if we are to give this image its own poetic space, then perhaps we should consider 3:16–19 as a third stanza. However, David Clines is probably correct in recognising connections of 3:16 with 3:11–12. Clines asks the appropriate question, if 3:16 introduces a new image but is connected to the images of 3:11–12, then “why it is to be found in its present place”?⁶⁶ According to Clines, an adequate reason for a second related image (new-born/ stillborn) enables the poet to set up “two (three-line) depictions of Sheol existence (vv. 13–15, 17–19) ... which need to have their individuality preserved. For the first deals only with the holders of power, and speaks from a seemingly neutral position, while the second constantly juxtaposes the powerful and powerless and identifies with the latter.”⁶⁷ Here in Job 3:11–19 are potentially appropriate resources for the women of Funda Wenza to incorporate into their stillborn burial liturgy.

The stillborn child, shunned by the traditional funeral liturgies of their AICs, here finds the dignity of “tranquillity” and “rest” (3:13) within the same place as “kings and ministers of state” (14) and wealthy “princes” (15). Most importantly, in this place, the stillborn child experiences “rest” (17), “ease” (18), and equality (19).⁶⁸ I have followed Clines in the translations offered but there

⁶³ Masenya (Ngwana’ Mphahlele) mentions this text in a parenthesis but does not elaborate on it; Masenya (Ngwana’ Mphahlele), “Her Appropriation of Job’s Lament?,” 284. One of the reviewers of my article helpfully offers Eccl 6:3–6 as another potential resource “which confers upon the stillborn child a state of better rest in the afterlife than the profligate wealthy who has found no enjoyment.”

⁶⁴ Here, I follow David J.A. Clines, *Word Biblical Commentary: Job 1-20* (Dallas: Word Books, 1989), 89.

⁶⁵ Clines, *Word Biblical Commentary: Job 1-20*, 68.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 68.

remains the challenge of working with this text in African vernacular translations, as became clear in a postgraduate module when we discussed the usefulness of this text for the burial of stillborn children, with each student reflecting on their own African vernacular translation of 3:16. How we translate 3:16 in our African languages is significant for how it might be used in a stillborn burial liturgy. For example, the commonly used 1959 isiZulu translation render 3:16 as follows: “*noma ngangingekho njengokuphuphumileyo okuthukusiweyo, njengezingane ezingazange zibone ukukhanya.*”

The translation of טָמֵן is pivotal,⁶⁹ as indeed is the entirety of 3:16 and I envisage a CBS with the women of Funda Wenza in which we grapple with how to translate this passive participle within its textual location. How would the women of Funda Wenza retranslate⁷⁰ this pivotal verse to appropriately affirm their stillborn children? Furthermore, what other aspects of Job 3:1–19 would they appropriate and how?

Job continues to summon socially engaged African biblical scholars to re-read this text together with ordinary African readers and users of the Bible as their contexts in turn demand to hear a voice from scripture that is relevant to their lived realities. The two examples I have invoked, one from Masenya’s work and the other from the work of the Ujamaa Centre, demonstrate the capacity of the book of Job to interrogate difficult cultural customs in African contexts.

F CONCLUSION

Forged within the political anti-apartheid struggle of 1980s South Africa, the Ujamaa Centre worked primarily within the interlocking system of racism and capitalism. It was work within this understanding of ‘the struggle’ that took the Ujamaa Centre to Amawoti, working with various community-based projects that were established to resist racial capitalism. Amawoti itself was a construct of racial capitalism, one of a myriad of informal settlements ringing the city of Durban and constituting 52% of the total population.⁷¹ Deliberately—systemically—impoverished by the apartheid state, Amawoti subsisted on minimal public services, with no permanent health centre in the area, being entirely dependent on twice-weekly mobile clinics.⁷² As Graham Philpott explains, “[t]he conditions in which people live in Amawoti ensure that life is a constant struggle for survival. Basic needs are secured by hard toil and creative schemes, with no certainty of their provision in the immediate future.”⁷³ As

⁶⁹ Ibid., 73 (16.b.). See also how the Septuagint translates this verse, which is often used as the text for other translations.

⁷⁰ For a detailed and incisive analysis of the notion of African ‘re-translation,’ see Nathan Esala, *Biblical Translation as Invasion in Postcolonial Northern Ghana* (IVBS 18 (Atlanta: SBL, 2024).

⁷¹ Philpott, *Jesus Is Tricky and God Is Undemocratic*, 32.

⁷² Ibid., 32.

⁷³ Ibid., 33.

Philpott goes on to state, "The cost of poverty is immeasurable when one suffers the death of one's child as a result of the combination of diarrhea and malnutrition."⁷⁴ Here, the women of Funda Wenza would want to include their too many miscarriages.

The invitation to work within Amawoti came from the Ilimo Community Project, a project initiated in March 1988 by organised sectors of the community to respond to the devastation caused by the floods of 1987 but a project which "soon extended beyond the crisis of the flood, and ... began to address the health needs of the community caused by poverty and oppression."⁷⁵ Compounding the problems of systemic apartheid oppression was the conflict generated by the attempts of the apartheid state's security forces aligned with Inkatha to prevent the community-based organising work of the United Democratic Front (UDF) and the African National Congress (ANC).⁷⁶

In the midst of these interlocking systems of oppression, the Ujamaa Centre joined the Ilimo Community Project in community-based and community-organised Bible study.⁷⁷ We were then invited to work directly with the Funda Wenza women's group and then with the permission of the women, with the Amawoti Minister's Organisation (AMO), a formation of male led AICs in Amawoti. Though our primary site of struggle was engaging with the community within the interlocking racial-political-economic systems of oppression that dominated their lives, the lived intersection of gender, culture and health for the women of the community summoned CBS work.⁷⁸

Similarly, shaped by the same South African theological trajectories of African Theology and Black Theology and the lived realities of South African women within multiple interlocking systems of oppression, Masenya has been summoned by her immediate community among the Northern Sotho and by the wider community of South African and African women to re-read the Bible with them. Furthermore, Masenya identified the Old Testament Society of South Africa (OTSSA) as a site of struggle, engaging this structure with her presence, her regular publications in Old Testament Essays (OTE), and her analysis of the

⁷⁴ Ibid., 33.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 40.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 34–36; Roy Ainslie, Mary De Haas, and Linda Mkhize, *Natal Monitor: Summary of Political Violence in Natal* (Durban: University of Natal, 1991–1993); Anthea J. Jeffery, *The Natal Story: Sixteen Years of Conflict* (Johannesburg: South African Institute of Race Relations, 1997); Laurence Piper, "Nationalism without a Nation: The Rise and Fall of Zulu Nationalism in South Africa's Transition to Democracy, 1975–99," *Nations and Nationalism* 8/1 (2002): 73–94.

⁷⁷ Philpott, *Jesus Is Tricky and God Is Undemocratic*, 39–43.

⁷⁸ Sibeko and Haddad, "Reading the Bible 'with' Women"; West, *Taming Texts of Terror*, 166.

OTSSA and OTE as institutions.⁷⁹ The book of Job in general and Job 3 in particular have been recurring sites of struggle too, returning as she has, again and again,⁸⁰ to re-read Job within the interlocking systems of oppression that shape our South African reality.

This article honours the decades-long contribution of Madipoane Masenya (Ngwana' Mphahlele), a true comrade in re-reading the Bible, particularly the Old Testament/ Hebrew Bible, within the interlocking systems of oppression that have constituted South Africa, especially those interlocking systems that have dominated the lives of African women. My article has identified a particular contribution of Masenya's, among many, focusing on her work in the intersection of culture and gender and on how this intersection has intersected with further systems of oppression, including dominating retributive epistemologies and theologies and dominating anthropocentric ecologies and theologies.

Just as Masenya has chosen a storytelling mode of discourse in re-engaging with Job 3, so too I have chosen a storytelling orientation by placing the story of the Ujamaa Centre alongside Masenya's. Together we have journeyed from the late 1980s into the present, ever attentive to recognising and resisting the interlocking systems of oppression that control our lived South African realities, particularly the realities of South African women.

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⁷⁹ See, for example, Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele) and Ramantswana, "Anything New under the Sun of South African Old Testament Scholarship?"

⁸⁰ In addition to the articles discussed in my analysis, see also Masenya (Ngwana' Mphahlele), "Between Unjust Suffering and the 'Silent' God"; Masenya (Ngwana' Mphahlele), "The Bible, HIV/AIDS and African-South African Women."

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