Mosadi ke Motho: Masenya's Contribution to Indigenous Gender Theorisation

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ABSTRACT

This article engages Madipoane Masenya's Bosadi approach as a critical framework for re-imagining gender from an indigenous African perspective. Rooted in African womanist theology, Bosadi offers an epistemological alternative to Western gender constructs, foregrounding the lived experiences and intellectual agency of African womxn. Drawing on socio-linguistic analysis, the article interrogates the lexical and philosophical significance of the term mosadi, revealing its divergence from the Western category of "woman." Through a close reading of linguistic forms such as mosadi and umfazi, the study uncovers embedded cultural values grounded in ubuntu/botho, where personhood is communal and ethically anchored. The Bosadi approach is positioned as a transformative tool for scholars grappling with the entanglements of race, gender and colonial history in South Africa. Ultimately, this article affirms the importance of centring indigenous knowledge systems in feminist scholarship and demonstrates the expansive intellectual possibilities that Bosadi brings to decolonial gender discourse.

KEYWORDS: Gender, African Feminism, Indigenous Gender, Madipoane Masenya, Translation, Bosadi

A INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, scholarship on gender and sexuality has increasingly turned its focus towards indigenous perspectives, seeking to challenge and deconstruct dominant Western paradigms that often overlook and marginalise non-Western experiences. This paradigmatic shift is particularly pronounced in contexts such as South Africa, where the legacy of colonisation and apartheid has profoundly shaped societal norms and academic discourse alike. Within this complex terrain,

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scholars like Madipoane Masenya (Ngwana’ Mphahlele) are important because they offer alternative frameworks that centre indigenous African womxn's experiences and voices in scholarship.

Rooted in her dual roles as theologian and womanist scholar, Masenya advocates for a reclamation of indigenous African perspectives on gender, positioning *Bosadi* as a theoretical lens and a transformative tool for understanding and asserting African womxn's agency and subjectivities. Masenya's conceptualisation of the *Bosadi* approach stands as a notable example of intellectual resistance. Her approach offers a critical entry point into the interrogation and re-imagination of gender categories from an indigenous epistemological perspective. It offers alternative tools for scholars grappling with the entanglements of race, gender and colonial history in South Africa.

This study engages with Masenya's *Bosadi* approach within the context of contemporary gender discourse in South Africa. It explores how this framework challenges conventional gender binaries imposed by Western ideologies, particularly as they intersect with the experiences of Black colonised and racialised womxn. By drawing on Masenya's insights, this study aims to uncover alternative ways of conceptualising and theorising gender that emerge from African contexts, emphasising the significance of reclaiming and centring indigenous knowledge in feminist scholarship. Through a critical examination of Masenya's theoretical contributions and borrowing from socio-linguistics, this article demonstrates the relevance and transformative potential of the *Bosadi* approach in redefining gender discourses within the South African academy.

B MASENYA AND INDIGENOUS GENDER THEORISING

I am a gender scholar who has no theological background but has been interested in grappling with the idea of what an indigenous theory of gender in the context of South Africa would look like. In that pursuit, I found the work of Madipoane Masenya very instructive, particularly, her bold theorisation of the *Bosadi* approach. In my work, Masenya’s conceptualisation of the *Bosadi* approach has been a productive theoretical tool that aids me in the unpacking of the entangled position that Black colonised/racialised womxn find themselves in and to explore what other alternatives are opened to us in reimagining the subjectivity of African womxn when thinking in consort with Masenya using the *Bosadi* approach.

The question of gender among Black people in South Africa and Africa more broadly has been a subject of manoeuvre at best and of reluctant compliance with Western discourses at worst. With a history of colonisation and apartheid, Black South Africans are no strangers to racial discrimination and are acutely aware of the historical systemic and discursive dehumanisation endured

under white supremacy.[1] Despite this awareness, the impact of this historical othering and exclusion from the category of the 'human' has not been adequately reflected in academic writings about what it means to be a female living among the colonised.

African feminists and gender scholars have extensively written on various pertinent topics, such as green politics, neo-colonialism and patriarchy in the African context. However, few have critically examined the conceptual categories we use to articulate and theorise the fundamental question of what it means to be a female of African origin in the contemporary political and discursive climate. This question is particularly pertinent because scholars such as Sylvia Wynter, Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí and Maria Lugones have shown that, at least within the Western episteme, which has historically been characterised by exclusionism based on race, class and other factors, being born with a particular anatomy does not automatically qualify one as a citizen among those called 'women.'[2]

For the purposes of this discussion, I will use the concept of 'womxn,' following Kunz when writing about Black womxn to highlight the marginal position they have historically occupied when it comes to the subject of gender categorisation, primarily because of their blackness.[3] According to Black feminist scholar Kunz, 'womxn' is "an intersectional concept that seeks to include transgender womxn, womxn of colour, and womxn of Third World countries." Elsewhere, I make the argument that historically, Black womxn have been discursively constructed as delinquents to the sex/gender anatomical

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1 Bernard Magubane, *The Making of a Racist State: British Imperialism and the Union of South Africa, 1875-1910* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1996); Andile Mngxitama, Amanda Alexander, and Nigel C. Gibson, eds., *Biko Lives! Contesting the Legacies of Steve Biko* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Tendayi Sithole, *Steve Biko: Decolonial Meditations of Black Consciousness* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2016); Anjuli Webster, "South African Social Science and the Azanian Philosophical Tradition," *Theoria* 68 (2021): 111–135; Anjuli Webster, "On Conquest and Anthropology in South Africa," *SAJHR* 34 (2018): 398–414.

2 Sylvia Wynter, "Afterword: 'Beyond Miranda's Meanings: Un/Silencing the "Demonic Ground" of Caliban's "Woman,"' in *Out of the Kumbla: Caribbean Women and Literature* (ed. Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory; Trenton: Africa World Press, 1990), 355–372; Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); María Lugones, "Toward a Decolonial Feminism," *Hypatia* 25 (2010): 742–759; María Lugones, "The Coloniality of Gender," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Gender and Development* (ed. Wendy Harcourt; London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 13–33.

3 Alexis Kunz, "Womxn: An Evolution of Identity," *Summit Salish to Sea: Inquiries and Essays* 4 (2019), https://cedar.wwu.edu/s2ss/vol4/iss1/2.

schema.[4] This argument is in line with Wynter's observation that the European expansion to the 'new world' saw a shift in human taxonomies.[5] This shift ushered in an ontological and epistemological mutation where previously the ordering of humans, believed to be divinely ordained by the Christian God, was in accordance with a sex/gender divide that relied on anatomical difference. The man was the head and the woman was to submit to him and henceforth, I will refer to this taxonomy as the sex/gender anatomical schema. With the expansion to the 'new world,' the enslavement and colonisation of Africa(ns), a new order of human categorisation was inaugurated. The primary determinant of hierarchy shifted from the sex/gender anatomical schema onto the centrality of physiognomy that separated humans on the basis of race, which henceforth I will refer to as the physiognomic schema of race. The consequence of this mutation was that the sex/gender anatomical schema became contingent on the physiognomic schema of race. In other words, only those deemed to be full human beings could qualify to be categorised in terms of the sex/gender anatomical schema, as men and women proper.

Masenya's work is instructive in this regard because she calls upon Black womxn to "re-define and rename ourselves. To call ourselves in our own names and say it in our own voices."[6] Furthermore, her pursuit is aimed at restoring the full humanity of Africans as "being created in God's image."[7] She adopts the concept of '*mosadi*' in redefining what it means to be a womxn who is African in the context of a racialised South Africa. This does not speak to a redefinition that is a form of conversion; instead, it speaks to a reversion. A return to what was and a jettisoning of what could not be. This is important because, although having had indigenous modes and ways of social organisation that pre-date the arrival and imposition of the logics of the sex-gender anatomical schema, the orientation of Africans to the system of the sex/gender anatomical schema never quite ensured their place as 'women' proper; they were always close but never quite there. They have always been delinquents of sorts.

Ngcobozi demonstrates in her work that one of the key things that missionaries did upon arriving in Southern Africa in their efforts to "civilise" and Christianise the indigenous peoples was to open chapters such as the Methodist Church's Black womxn's organisation, Manyano, whose aim was to teach the indigenous womxn Victorian ideals of womanhood—in other words, to be 'proper women.'[8] The implication here is that being 'woman' was not a

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4 Palesa Nqambaza, *Rethinking the Logics of the Sex/Gender Anatomical Schema* (PhD diss., University of the Witwatersrand, 2023).

5 Wynter, "Afterword," 355–372.

6 Madipoane Masenya, "Redefining Ourselves: A Bosadi (Womanhood) Approach," *OTE* 10/3 (1997): 439.

7 Masenya, "Redefining Ourselves," 442.

8 Lihle Ngcobozi, *Lizalise Idinga Lakho [Honour Thy Promise]: The Methodist Church Women's Manyano, the Bifurcated Public Sphere, Divine Strength, Ubufazi*

natural state for the indigenous peoples; they had to be oriented into it. Some of these ideas of what it means to be a 'respectable Christian' woman in accordance with a racist and sexist gaze still prevail in contemporary South Africa, as demonstrated in Masenya's work that challenges these patriarchal legacies.[9]

I seek to borrow Masenya's conceptualisation of *bosadi* to articulate the entangled position in which Black colonised/racialised womxn find themselves and to explore what other alternatives are opened to us in re-imagining the subjectivity of African womxn when thinking in consort with Masenya's *Bosadi* approach. What is important is that Masenya's invocation of *bosadi* offers us indigenous alternatives to think of females in Africa from an African episteme. In fact, this invocation of alternative conceptual categories is self-affirming. It confirms that before the conceptual category 'woman' mastered competent technology to sail from Europe to Africa, *Abantu* already had identity markers and modes of social organisation that they used to makes sense of their subjectivities and social organisation.

C *BOSADI* AS A THEORETICAL LENS

Masenya's *bosadi* is a tool that is mainly preoccupied with the interpretation of biblical text from an African womxn's perspective. However, in my scholarship I have used it as a theoretical lens to unpack concepts that are key to gender studies, in particular the category of 'woman.' Here, I use the *Bosadi* approach to unsettle the assumption that we can use the conceptual categories such as '*mosadi* and *umfazi*' as equivalents of the category of 'woman.'

According to Masenya (Ngwana' Mphahlele),

> The *bosadi* framework was coined from [a] commitment to making "Africa" a hermeneutical lens for reading the biblical text. The term *mosadi* (for woman) does not only occur in the Northern Sotho setting, but also in other South African indigenous languages, for example, *wansati* (Xitsonga); *umfazi* (isiZulu), *musadzi* (Tshivenda); *mosadi* (Setswana and Sesotho). As a matter of fact, the root – (s) adi does occur in other African languages outside of South Africa (e.g.,

and Motherhood in Post-Apartheid South Africa (Master's thesis, Rhodes University, Makhanda, 2017): 32.

9 Madipoane Masenya (Ngwana' Mphahlele), "Their Hermeneutics Was Strange! Ours Is a Necessity! Rereading Vashti as African-South African Women," in *Her Master's Tools? Feminist and Postcolonial Engagements of Historical-Critical Discourse* (ed. Caroline Vander Stichele and Todd Penner; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005): 179-194.

> *mswasi* in the Mongo of the DRC; - *mkazi,* in Chewa, Malawi and *sadi* in the Tswana of Bostwana, among others).[10]

The above quote is instructive as Masenya clearly identifies the *Bosadi* approach as a hermeneutical tool for centring the African experience when reading biblical texts. Therefore, if we consider the *Bosadi* approach as an interpretive tool that insists on centring the African continent, African epistemologies become essential sites for interpretive and knowledge extraction in this exercise.

When one engages with Masenya's corpus of work, it becomes evident that there are key themes that characterise the *Bosadi* approach. The first and most significant aspect we draw from Masenya's usage of *bosadi* is the centrality she places on context. It is very clear in her work that the African continent is her locus of enunciation. She maintains that "although the *mosadi* reader acknowledges the significance of the contexts that produced the biblical texts, the context of the modern [*mosadi*] reader takes priority over the former."[11] Thus, when she approaches a biblical text, her context and positionality as a Black woman living in South Africa plays a role in shaping how she interprets biblical texts. For this reason, when I use the *Bosadi* approach in studying gender and feminist literature, I am mindful of my context and positionality and probe how these two aspects intersect with what is produced on the subject of 'woman.'

Secondly, Masenya is very mindful of language and its potential as an archival site that is rich with African knowledge(s). For this reason, key Sesotho concepts are not translated in her writings, including the key concepts of '*mosadi*' and '*bosadi*'– they are not translated into 'woman.' *Mosadi* is presented as an agentic subject who is actively engaged in the process of self-definition. In her work, it is evident that Masenya understands that in the act of translation, the essence of what is said in Sesotho risks being lost in the process. In fact, in her other works, Masenya writes articles entirely in Sesotho and does not provide translated versions of the same article.[12] According to Mokoena (2024:93), Masenya writes in Sesotho "to contain […] meaning, strategy, and impact within the text."[13]

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[10] Madipoane Masenya (Ngwana' Mphahlele), "An African Methodology for South African Biblical Sciences: Revisiting the Bosadi (Womanhood) Approach," *OTE* 18 (2005): 741–751; italics are from Masenya's original text.

[11] Masenya (Ngwana' Mphahlele), "Their Hermeneutics Was Strange!," 184.

[12] Madipoane Masenya (Ngwana' Mphahlele), "Wa re o Bona e Hlotsa, wa e Nametsa Thaba! Bibele, Basadi ba Maafrika ba Afrika-Borwa le HIV le AIDS," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 31 (2010): 1-7.

[13] Lerato Mokoena, "Bosadi Theology of Masenya Madipoane (Ngwana' Mphahlele)," in *Nehanda: Women's Theologies of Liberation in Southern Africa* (Circle Jubilee Volume 3; ed. Nelly Mwale, Rosinah Gabaitse, and Fundiswa Kobo; Bamberg: University of Bamberg Press, 2024), 93.

The final aspect that I find striking in Masenya's work is the dis-ease that Masenya appears to have with the conceptual category 'woman.' Often, we witness Masenya opting to use the concept of 'female' instead of 'woman' when speaking of Africans. I lean into this inconsistent use of 'woman' and 'female' in Masenya's work and argue that it speaks to the fact that Masenya is aware that '*mosadi*' and 'woman' are not equivalents at the linguistic, epistemic, ontological and philosophical levels. In the sections below, I engage with the question of '*mosadi*' and its cognate, '*umfazi*' to demonstrate why these two indigenous concepts ought not to be treated as equivalents of the western conceptual category 'woman.' I do this employing the methodological strategies I draw from Masenya which include using language as an evidential field in research and taking the African context and experience seriously in my analysis.

D ON TRANSLATION

Kenyan author and academic Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o reminds us of the importance of language, which functions as a communication tool and a cultural archival site. He argues that when African children learn and speak English, they are orientated to a culture other than their own. For wa Thiongo,

> [C]ulture does not just reflect the world in images but actually, through those very images, conditions a child to see that world in a certain way, the colonial child was made to see the world and where he stands in it is seen and defined by or reflected in the culture of the language of imposition.[14]

The argument that wa Thiongo is making here is that cultures are carried through languages. Thus, words are not neutral since they are embedded within specific cultures.[15] To speak English then is to communicate English culture. Similarly, with indigenous languages, to speak Sesotho is to communicate the Sesotho culture and world-sense that is embedded in the language. For this reason, the work of translating languages with the aim of finding 'equivalents' ought to be interrogated. I raise the question of translation because, for instance, the iconic mantra of the womxn that marched to the Union Buildings in 1956 was '*Wathint'bafazi, wathint'imbokodo*,*'* which has been translated numerous times as "You touch[/strike] the woman, you touch[/strike] the rock."[16] However, as I demonstrate below, a deeper linguistic probe into the conceptual category '*umfazi*' makes evident that it would be closer to translate the mantra '*Wathint'bafazi, wathint'imbokodo*,*'* into 'you touch[/strike] the great mortal, you touch[/strike] the rock.' Upon closer scrutiny, the comparison of a great

[14] Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1987), 17.

[15] Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind.*

[16] Nomboniso Gasa, "Feminisms, Motherisms, Patriarchies and Women's Voices," in *Women in South African History: They Remove Boulders and Cross Rivers* (ed. Nomboniso Gasa; Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council, 2007), 21–52.

mortal to a rock is a lot more compatible than the figure of a 'woman' who has been discursively constructed as a negated 'other.'

Among the amaXhosa, a popular adage says, 'isiXhosa *asiTolikw*a,' which could be loosely translated as 'the isiXhosa language is not one to be translated' or 'one cannot translate isiXhosa.'[17] The philosophy behind this adage is that language is a carrier of culture, world-senses and modes of being. Moreover, any attempt to make an outsider understand a world-sense by altering it to fit what is familiar to them (the outsider) becomes futile because this process of translation necessitates that some things are lost, and some are accentuated in the process. Ultimately, by attempting to translate isiXhosa into a different language, what will come out as the product will be so altered that it might not resemble the original. To borrow from Derrida and his allegory of the Tower of Babel, God interrupts the project of the Semites who sought to build a tower that would reach the heavens in order to make a name for themselves, by disrupting the monolingualism that had facilitated their unity.[18] By imposing multiple tongues (languages) on them, the Semites are no longer able to understand one another and thus fail to continue with the project of building a tower that would reach the heavens. According to Derrida, God "at the same time imposes and forbids translation."[19] That is, he makes translation necessary and yet impossible at the same time. Indeed, one could say that the 'curse' of Babel persists to date where translation 'proper' remains an impossibility.

Every culture has its own particularities, to understand these particularities, one must immerse oneself in that culture, which also entails learning the language of the people.[20] Similarly, Talaal Asad maintains that to understand a culture that is foreign to them, the anthropologists' job entails more than just merely "matching sentences in the abstract."[21] It necessitates that an

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17 Athambile Masola, Review of *In India and East Africa/ e-Indiya nase East Africa: A Travelogue in isiXhosa and English* (by D. D. T. Jabavu; translated by Cecil Wele Manona; ed. Tina Steiner, Mhlobo W. Jadezweni, Catherine Higgs, and Evan Mwangi; Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2020), *Review of African Political Economy* 47, no. 165 (2020),; Teresa Dowling, "Not 'Deep' but Still IsiXhosa: Young People's Urban IsiXhosa and Its Relation to Tsotsitaal," in *Youth Language Practices and Urban Language Contact in Africa* (ed. Rajend Mesthrie, Elizabeth Hurst-Harosh, and Heather Brookes; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 27–47.

18 Jacques Derrida, "Des Tours de Babel," in *Difference in Translation* (ed. and trans. Joseph F. Graham; Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 165–207.

19 Derrida, "Des Tours de Babel," 170.

20 Christi A. Merrill, "Postcolonial Translation: The Politics of Language as Ethical Praxis," in *The Routledge Handbook of Translation Studies* (ed. Carmen Millán and Francesca Bartrina; New York: Routledge, 2013), 758.

21 Talal Asad, *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Nachdr. ed. Experiments in Contemporary Anthropology; Durham: School of American Research Press, 2008), 149.

anthropologist must learn to *"live another form of life* and to speak another kind of language."[22] This exercise becomes particularly important in the process of translation because it opens an opportunity for the translator to understand what Spivak refers to as 'the difference of language.'[23] After all, as aptly captured by J.M. Coetzee, "[t]here is never enough closeness of fit between languages for formal features of a work to be mapped across from one language to another without shift of value […] something must be 'lost.'"[24]

Rudolf Pannwitz's work, in many ways, supports Asad's argument. Part of what makes 'translation' not without fault is that translators, who are often speakers of dominant languages and carriers of dominant cultures, tend to want to turn (translate) the original language into their own language instead of finding ways to manipulate their language to capture what is said in the original language.[25] In other words, translating is not merely a translation exercise but also a colonising exercise. It reconfigures and creates the world of the indigenous peoples in its own image. The controversy here becomes that coloniality transforms indigenous cultures in its process of translation and that the indigenous cultures become devalued in the process. The task of ethnographers translating what they 'observe' into English has had multiple implications for how the culture of the indigenous people has been framed in text and understood by both the translator and the indigenous people. Here I understand the task of translation into English not as a mere linguistic translation but also a cultural translation. It is not surprising that the perpetual subject of feminism, even its African/South African variants, is 'woman' and not '*mosadi*. My intervention thus becomes preoccupied with attempting to rescue African concepts from colonial clutches because, to borrow from wa Thiong'o, there is no amount of Senghorian "black blood" that can be injected into the rusty joints of 'woman' to make it '*mosadi*.'[26] These are distinct cultural concepts in which ample value can be uncovered by treating them differently.

E UNPACKING THE LEXICAL ITEM *MOSADI*

In this section, I pay specific attention to the lexical item '*mosadi*' to unearth the cultural particularities that are hidden in treating '*mosadi*' as the conceptual equivalent of 'woman.' I do this by giving a brief background of the cultural and political context in which the subject 'woman' emerges and contrast this to the cultural and cosmological context that gives rise to '*mosadi*.'

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22 Asad, *Writing Culture*, 149; emphasis his.

23 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Donna Landry, and Gerald M. MacLean, eds., *The Spivak Reader: Selected Works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

24 Spivak et al., *The Spivak Reader*, 273.

25 Asad, *Writing Culture*, 157.

26 Ngũgĩ, *Decolonising the Mind*, 7.

As I have demonstrated elsewhere, from the first wave of the feminist movement until the most recent movements, we have witnessed different iterations of feminist activism that show that by no means should women be constructed as the subservient "others" of men.[27] For instance, When France's National Constituent Assembly drafted the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen* in 1789, (white) women were excluded from public life, even though the decisions made within the political sphere also affected their lives. In response to the persistent exclusion of (white) women from participating in public life, French political activist and playwright de Gouges wrote *The Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen* to confront the displacement of (white) women from personhood. *The Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen* was meant to champion the inalienable civil liberties of all human beings. These early feminist writers and theorists justified their claims to full humanity and personhood using the very same language employed to deny their status to full humanity and personhood—the language of rationality. In pursuit of staking their claim to full humanity and personhood, (white) women were encouraged to exercise their rational faculties and move away from concerning themselves with frivolous activities such as beauty and fashion. Likewise, in the postscript of her *Declaration of the Rights of Women and the Female Citizen,* de Gouges urges women to "wake up" because "the powerful empire of nature is no longer surrounded by prejudice, fanaticism, superstition, and lies. The flame of truth has dispersed all the clouds of folly and usurpation."[28] In this statement, the centrality given to reason and claims to 'truth' becomes evident, signifying her dedication to the ideas of the Enlightenment period. Paradoxically, as de Gouges was making these calls in France in pursuit of the emancipation of (white) women, the same Enlightenment ideals were being weaponised by Western powers to colonise the indigenous peoples of Southern Africa in the Cape Colony, under the façade of a civilising mission because the indigenous peoples were framed as those without reason and thus incapable of self-governance.

Wollstonecraft' in her book, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, employs a similar language:

> If… [women] be really capable of acting like rational creatures, let them not be treated like slaves; or, like the brutes who are dependent on the reason of man, when they associate with him; but cultivate their minds,

[27] Palesa Nqambaza, "No Colonised Females Are Women: A Query into the Discursive Exclusion of Black Womxn from the Category of 'Woman,'" in *Decoloniality in Gender Discourse and Praxis: A View from the Margins* (ed. M. I. Kamlongera; London: Routledge, 2025), 25–41.

[28] Olympe de Gouges, "Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen, 1791," in *Tolerance, The Beacon of the Enlightenment* (ed. Celia Warman; Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 1971), 49–51.

> give them the salutary, sublime curb of principle, and let them attain conscious dignity by feeling themselves only dependent on God.[29]

De Gouges and Wollstonecraft thus stake their claim to humanity by asserting their capability of rationality. This western history of how the 'human' is discursively constructed then leads decolonial scholar Lugones to conclude that 'man and woman' became the markers "of the human and … civilization," "only the civilized are men or women."[30] This then meant that the fate of Black people and indigenous peoples of Africa, the Americas and Australia was to first struggle to be human before the gender conversation would be extended to them.

This burden that taints the discursive history of what has been conceptualised as the 'human' is what prompts Chigumadzi to attempt to rescue the indigenous conception of '*umuntu*' from the 'human.'[31] For Chigumadzi, "The human and *umuntu* are not interchangeable historically or metaphysically. 'The human' arises and exists through conquest of *umuntu*."[32] She makes this point after demonstrating that the western 'human' proper, who is constructed following the logic of the Cartesian "*cogito, ergo sum*," "I think therefore I am," is exclusively white and a man. Black people on the other hand, were in their totality, constructed as those that do not possess reason or rationality and thus could not be said to be human.[33] However, (white) women were also victims of this discursive othering that was a result of the Cartesian logic of being. Therefore, the same epistemic machinery that was used to 'other' Black people was also instrumentalised against (white) women. For this reason, to be a woman in accordance with the western episteme was to be 'other.' Chigumadzi's rescue of *umuntu* (*motho*) from the exclusionary conceptual category of the human has meant that we are able to see that if "woman" is the female of the human, then, *mosadi*/*umfazi* is the female of *motho*/*umuntu*. However, with the advent of colonialism and the spread of Christianity, we witness a concerted effort to impose the idea of 'woman' on indigenous 'feminine' forms of subjectivity such as *mosadi*, *umfazi*, nswati among others, while it is so glaringly evident that the cosmological foundations that inform the concepts 'woman' and '*mosadi*' or '*umfazi*' are in tension.

Mosadi and Umfazi Linguistic and Cosmological Foundations

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[29] Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Rethinking the Western Tradition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 61.

[30] María Lugones, "Toward a Decolonial Feminism," *Hypatia* 25/4 (2010): 743.

[31] Panashe Chigumadzi, "On the Dangers of Descartes' 'I,' or Misconceiving Ubuntu as 'I Am Because We Are,'" (unpublished manuscript, 2023).

[32] Chigumadzi, "On the Dangers of Descartes' 'I,'.

[33] René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* (trans. John Cottingham; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 17.

As already demonstrated above, while 'woman' emerges in the book of Genesis already as the 'other,' that is not the case among *Abantu*. In *Abantu* cosmology, *umuntu* or *motho* is the primary being with full ethical and moral value. This ethical and moral value is encoded in the languages of *Abantu*. According to Cole, Setswana has different classes of nouns, the first class of nouns are exclusively personal pronouns.[34] Class one nouns have to do with beings that have personhood and begin, with the prefix '*mo*' for the singular and "*ba*" in the plural. These include '*mosadi*,' a compound word with the prefix '*mo*' and the root 's*adi*,' *mo-sadi*, what is typically translated as woman, although I aim to complicate this simplistic translation. Secondly, there is '*monna,*' which is typically translated as 'man.' '*Monna*' is a compound word composed of the prefix '*mo*' and the root of the word '*nna*,' *mo-nna*.[35] Both '*mosadi*' and '*monna*' have '*mo*' as their prefix which indicates that each of them is *motho*/*umuntu* (*batho*/*abuntu* in the plural) and both have full personhood. The *botho* (be-ing) of all the individuals referred to using Class one nouns is established linguistically. This personhood is captured in the philosophy of *ubuntu*/*botho* which is a philosophy that encapsulates the ontology and epistemology of the indigenous people of South Africa.

The African adage goes, '*Motho ke motho ka batho*' or '*Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*,' what Chigumadzi has translated as "A person is a person through other people" in an effort to move away from the Mbitian version of the translation, "I am because we are," which, she maintains is a mistranslation that recycles the Cartesian "I"—a liberal androcentric and anthropocentric notion, dressed in African garb.[36] She maintains, "As it becomes clear when we elaborate *ubuntu* on its own historical and metaphysical terms, the classic Mbitian mistranslation owes more to Christian and Cartesian metaphysics which elevate "I" or the self as the ultimate path to communion with God and humanity, than it does to African metaphysics," which elevate community, as evidenced in the adage '*Motho* ke *motho ka batho'* or '*Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*.'[37]

Mogobe Ramose, speaking of *ubuntu* as philosophy, reminds us that:

> [*Ubuntu* (*botho*)] is actually two words in one. It consists of the prefix *ubu-* [bo] and the stem *ntu-* [tho]. Ubu- [bo]evokes the idea of be-ing in general. It is enfolded be-ing before it manifests itself in the concrete form or mode of existence of a particular entity. *Ubu-* as

[34] Desmond T. Cole, *An Introduction to Tswana Grammar* (London: Longmans, Green and co., 1955).

[35] In as much as I complicate the simplistic translation of the conceptual category of '*mosadi*' to woman, I could and should do the same for the conceptual category of '*monna.*' However, it is not in the scope of this study to do so. Therefore, this an aspect of this research I will temporarily overlook.

[36] Chigumadzi, *On the Dangers of Descartes' "I,"* 4.

[37] Ibid., 19.

> enfolded bei-ing (sic) is always oriented towards unfoldment, that is, incessant continual concrete manifestation through particular forms and modes of being. In this sense, *ubu-* [bo] is always oriented towards – *ntu* [tho].[38]

The obvious distinction here is, how among Bantu language speakers, as Dladla indicates, the white people that invaded the indigenous peoples for the purposes of colonisation, land grab, genocide with the ultimate aim of propping up a white supremacist polity, are never linguistically framed as *batho*/*abantu* or subjectivities that belong to the Class one nouns that are linked primarily to the idea of *botho*/*ubuntu*. Instead, they are referred to using Class three nouns; *lekgowa* in the singular and *makgowa* in the plural, making use of the same class of nouns which refer to objects without personhood. According to Dladla:

> It is for instance the case that Europeans (*abelungu*) are generally considered to not have *Ubuntu.* The effect of this is that by aggregation it might be said "*umlungu akusi umuntu*," he is white, he is not a human being. More precisely a question can be asked meaningfully "*ungumuntu na*?" [Is he a person?] to which the answer could be issued sensibly: "*cha ungumlungu*" [no he is white]. This is not a mode of reasoning based on race. It does not have its basis in biology. Rather, it is an ethical judgement based on the historical interaction between the indigenous conquered people conquered in the unjust wars of colonisation (*abantu*) on the one hand and their colonial conquerors (*abelungu*) on the other.[39]

The use of Class three nouns as a tool of exclusion is evident in other cases too. For instance, speaking of Class three nouns, Cole maintains that it is a "miscellaneous class [that] includes among other things names of parts of the body, animals, plants, natural phenomena, some collective nouns, and a number of personal pronouns."[40] However, what Cole overlooks is that the only time when the Basotho use the prefix "*le*" as a personal pronoun is when a Sesotho speaker is being derogatory and engaged in the exercise of othering the said subject, for example, referring to a Zulu individual as leZulu instead of moZulu or a Ndebele individual as leTebele instead of moTebele. This linguistic othering was also often used historically when referring to groups that are deemed foreign and once they would be in close contact with Batswana/Basotho for a sustained period and gained familiarity, they would be referred to using the Class one prefix '*mo*.' Examples are the distinction between Lesarwa and Mosarwa to refer

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38 Mogobe B. Ramose, *African Philosophy Through Ubuntu* (rev. ed.; Harare: Mond Books, 2005), 35.

39 Ndumiso Dladla, "Towards an African Critical Philosophy of Race: Ubuntu as a Philo-Praxis of Liberation," *Filosofia Theoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religions* 6 (2017): 54.

40 Cole, *An Introduction to Tswana Grammar*, 79.

to the Khoi and the San people, where the former is widely accepted as derogatory in present day usage.[41]

I raise the fact of the use of the Class three prefix '*le*' to demonstrate that '*mosadi*' and '*monna*,' both being Class one nouns, carry equal ethical and moral value as *motho* in the Bantu cosmology should not be taken lightly. It is for this reason that those who are viewed as not meriting the status of full personhood are relegated by being designated using the Class three suffix, *'le'* instead of *'mo.'* Therefore, if '*mosadi*' was to be constructed as the 'other' as is the case with the 'woman,' this would be easily identifiable linguistically with the usage of the Class three noun to refer to them (African females), for example '*lesadi*.' In fact, a good example of how this othering would be employed is witnessed in the lexical item '*lefetwa*,' instead of '*mofetwa,*' which can be loosely translated as "the by-passed one," a derogatory term for womxn who are believed to have passed marriageable age.[42] The reason for this othering results from the fact that in many African cultures, marriage is seen as signalling the apex of maturity, an aspect Masenya problematises in her *Bosadi* approach.[43]

The question of withholding the status of *botho* from an individual and the usage from Class three nouns should not be equated with the dehumanisation that Black people were subjected to with the advent of colonisation and racialisation where the relegation of Black people from the category of the human meant that they could be brutalised without consequence. Although considered derogatory, it should be understood that the Batswana world-sense is not anthropocentric and thus, there is harmony between Batho and nature. In fact, the ultimate dehumanisation linguistically in Setswana and Sesotho would be to refer to an individual using Class four noun, '*selo*' which literally translates to 'a thing.'

The Morpheme "sadi"

Now that we have examined the first part of the lexical item '*mosadi,*' that is, the prefix '*mo*,' in this section we move on to the root of the word, '*sadi*' which is widely designated as female or feminine. Among Class one nouns, the morpheme '*adi*' appears in words such as *rakgadi* (*rra-kgadi*), which literally is a female father, *mohumhadi* (*mo-huma-hadi*), which refers to a queen or a wife and *morwahadi* (*mo-rwa-hadi*) which is a daughter, among others. From the few examples I have provided here, we see how the morpheme '*adi,*' which is the

41 Ibid., 81.

42 Mompoloki Bagwasi and Jane Sunderland, "Language, Gender and Age(ism) in Setswana," in *Gender and Language in Sub-Saharan Africa: Tradition, Struggle and Change* (ed. Lilian Lem Atanga, Sibonile Ellece, Lia Litosseliti, and Jane Sunderland; Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing, 2013), 63.

43 Masenya, "An African Methodology for South African Biblical Sciences", 741-751.

root word in '*mosadi,*' appears in nouns that refer to female subjects. However, the assumption that '*adi*' is a female designate becomes complicated when we consider other words that appear among Class one nouns. The first word to consider is *monghadi* (*mo-ng-hadi*), a salutation comparable to 'sir' in the English language; it is used to address respected adult male figures. The second word to consider is *mohlolohadi* (*mo-hlolo-hadi*), which is used to refer to widowed men or women. Perhaps the final example we should add to this category of words is *motswadi* (*mo-tsw[a]-adi*), which refers to a parent (either mother or father). This second group of words complicates the assumption that '*adi*' is a female designate and presents the possibility that perhaps there is more to the word '*mosadi*' beyond what Oyěwùmí calls bio-logical reasoning.[44]

To probe the question of '*mosadi*' as a concept that transcends bio-logical reasoning, I turn to isiXhosa, which is a member of the Southern Bantu language groups. While isiXhosa and Sesotho belong to different sub-groups within the Bantu language family (Nguni and Sotho-Tswana, respectively), they do share multiple similarities and cognates due to their common origin from the proto-Bantu languages. As Masenya highlights in her work, the concept of '*mosadi*' not only occurs in the Northern Sotho setting but also in other South African indigenous languages. In isiZulu and isiXhosa, it is *umfazi*. Phonetically, one can already discern the similarities between '*mosadi*' and *(u)mfazi*, demonstrating that indeed the two words are cognates.

According to the *Zulu-Kafir Dictionary* by Reverend William J. Davis, the etymology of the word '*umfazi*' is a combination of *u'mfo*' and '*azi*.' *Azi* is defined as "to know, acknowledged, distinguished; the primary meaning of which is: to conceive, to generate, to increase; hence, to conceive and bring forth young.[45] Other dialects have *fadi, fatsi*. Sis.: *mosadi* and *mosari*, then literally: a wife-man; a woman; a human female; a wife." The root word '*fo*' refers to a mortal being.[46] Davis also notes that the morpheme *kazi* (*azi*) also denotes to know, acknowledge and distinguish.[47] Although Davis is aware of the multiple meanings of the morpheme '*kazi,*' he insists on defining it as a gender signifier. On the other hand, Maseko challenges the idea that '*kazi*' is a gendered signifier. She maintains that "*kazi* reinforces the intensity of the idea of the root word, not in size, but in attributes."[48] For Maseko, *kazi* "adds a superlative, a degree of

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44 Oyěwùmí, *The Invention of Women*, 11.

45 Jacob Ludwig Döhne, *A Zulu-Kafir Dictionary, Etymologically Explained, with Copious Illustrations and Examples, Preceded by an Introduction on the Zulu-Kafir Language* (Cape Town: Juta, 1857), https://archive.org/details/azulukafirdicti01dhgoog/mode/2up.

46 Döhne, *A Zulu-Kafir Dictionary*, 81.

47 Ibid.

48 Pamela Maseko, "Language as a Source of Revitalisation and Reclamation of Indigenous Epistemologies: Contesting Assumptions and Re-imagining Women Identities in (African) Xhosa Society," in *Whose History Counts: Decolonising African*

greatness and awesomeness in the noun."[49] Following Maseko's logic, *um-fo-kazi (umfazi*) can be translated into 'a great mortal being.'

Maseko's argument is even more convincing when one considers the diminutive suffix '*ana*,' which can be considered the opposite of '*kazi*.'[50] For instance, Mager, limiting *ubufazi* (the state of being *umfazi*) exclusively to married females, indicates that there are three categories associated with the office of *ubufazi*. The first one is *umfazana*, a newlywed. *Umfazana* must "work for their mothers-in-law until the birth of a second child when they might ascend the hierarchical scale, becoming *umfazi*."[51] Then there is *umfazi omkhulu*, a wife who has reached a level of seniority or is the first wife in a polygamous setting. Thus, *umfazana* refers to a diminutive version of *umfo* (mortal), while *umfazi* is the superlative version of the same. In fact, African linguist, Mohlala highlights that "in the context of disgust and/or insult, a diminutive noun may convey a derogatory or pejorative significance."[52] Referring to a person as *umfazana* could be perceived as an insult depending on the context because it is diminutive.

Similarly in Sesotho/Setswana, *'ana'* is a diminutive suffix[53] and another term for a girl child is *mosana* (*mo-sana*). Whereas '*mosadi*' (*mo-sadi*) refers to a subject who has a certain level of seniority/maturity, as Bagwasi and Sunderland indicate, '*mosadi*' is a "social category label given in recognition of [ones] changed biological and social status."[54] Thus, it is evident that '*ana*' is a diminutive suffix while '*adi*' is superlative, as is '*kazi*,' its cognate.

When we consider the above, then, Maseko's observation that the morpheme '*kazi*' cannot be said to be a gender signifier has some validity.[55] The morpheme '*kazi*' is also used in compound words that typically refer to male figures, such as *ubawokazi* (*u-bawo-kazi*), which means great father, a paternal uncle in English or *umhlekazi* (*u-mhle-kazi*), which can be translated loosely as the beautiful one. *Umhlekazi* is often used in a similar way to the English honorific 'sir'; aimed at males.[56] Notably, in Sesotho/Setswana, the honorific that is equivalent to *umhlekazi* is *monghadi* (*mong-hadi*), which also carries the superlative suffix '*adi.*' Therefore, Maseko correctly indicates that considering

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Pre-Colonial Historiography (ed. June Bam, Lungisile Ntsebeza, and Allan Zinn; Stellenbosch: African Sun Media, 2018), 51.

49 Maseko, "Language as a Source of Revitalisation," 50.

50 Linkie Mohlala, "The Bantu Attribute Noun Class Prefixes and Their Suffixal Counterparts, with Special Reference to Zulu" (Unpublished Master's thesis, University of Pretoria, 2003).

51 Anne Mager, "Sexuality, Fertility and Male Power," *Agenda* 28 (1996): 16.

52 Mohlala, *The Bantu Attribute Noun Class Prefixes*.

53 Cole, *An Introduction to Tswana Grammar*, 105.

54 Bagwasi and Sunderland, "Language, Gender and Age(ism) in Setswana,"

55 Maseko, "Language as a Source of Revitalisation," 50.

56 Ibid.

the morpheme '*kazi*' (as is the case with '*adi*') as a gendered signifier is a limitation. Both Maseko and Davis recognise that the morpheme '*kazi*' designates being distinguished and set apart.

Therefore, it is evident that the lexical item '*mosadi,*' a compound word that is constituted by '*mo*' and '*sadi*,' speaks to a unique story, historically, epistemologically, ontologically and philosophically. For this reason, '*mosadi* and 'woman' cannot be treated as equivalents. It is also evident that the concept '*mosadi*' does not merely refer to a subject who is a female 'other.' Instead, it is a subjectivity that has full access to the status of personhood, having full moral and ethical value as *motho*. Furthermore, *mosadi* is a respected subject who has reached a particular level of maturity and seniority and thus merits respect in terms of an African world-sense.

Masenya's insistence on introducing the *Bosadi* approach thus demands of us to analyse the conceptual category of '*mosadi*' independently of 'woman' and to unearth what the linguistic and philosophical archive unveils about the indigenous peoples of South Africa and their world-sense.

F CONCLUSION

Madipoane Masenya (Ngwana' Mphahlele)'s contribution to South African Theology with the *Bosadi* approach reverberates in other disciplines, as is demonstrated in this article. Through her introduction of the *Bosadi* framework to the African intellectual ecosystem, I was able to explore the various potentialities that are presented to us when we grapple with what the *Bosadi* approach might mean for us in various disciplines, including indigenous gender studies.

In examining the lexical item '*mosadi,*' this article has unearthed cultural particularities embedded within indigenous South African languages, challenging the simplistic translation of '*mosadi*' as 'woman.' By exploring the African and Western historical and linguistic contexts, I have shown how '*mosadi*' and related terms such as '*umfazi*' in isiXhosa diverge significantly from the Western concept of 'woman.' These indigenous terms are deeply rooted in the philosophies of *ubuntu/botho*, emphasising full personhood and communal interdependence, unlike the Western notion of 'woman' as the subservient other to 'man.' The use of Class one nouns for '*mosadi*' and '*monna*' signifies their equal ethical and moral status within Bantu cosmology, a deliberate linguistic choice that upholds their personhood.

This article has also demonstrated that the etymological exploration of '*mosadi*' and its cognates supports the argument that these terms are not merely gender signifiers but carry superlative and distinguished connotations. This linguistic richness reflects a cultural world-sense that values the interconnectedness and inherent worth of all individuals, transcending the

limitations of Western gender constructs. Masenya's pioneering introduction of the *Bosadi* approach demands a nuanced engagement and understanding of '*mosadi*' that honours its unique linguistic, philosophical and cultural heritage. By delving into this indigenous archive, we uncover deeper insights into the conceptual and philosophical frameworks that inform the episteme of the indigenous peoples of South Africa, thereby enriching our broader understanding of gender and personhood.

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