

# Umfazi akangeni ebuhlanti emzini ... A womanist dialogue with Black Theology of Liberation in the 21st century



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As reflected in the title, this article is premised by pervasive attitudes arising from a complex interplay of cultural practices, which have succeeded in dislocating black women from what is perceived to be black men's sites, *ebuhlanti* (kraal), *esuthwini* (initiation school); locating them in culturally designated womanised sites *eziko/egoqweni* (kitchen and household), *ekuzaleni nasekukhuliseni abantwana* (child birth and rearing) in a patriarchal society. The crux of the article lies in its attempt to re-locate both men and women by its adoption of 'a hard-line pro-black position'. Womanists acknowledge the interlocation of black men and thus suggest firstly, a shift in mind-set for both to view these sites as life giving and therefore to look for convergences. The article is thus a dialogue between a womanist and Black Theology of Liberation in the 21st century for the purpose of understanding liberation of black people for the liberation of humanity.

## Introduction

As a starting point this article asserts that the struggle for South African black women to challenge the patriarchal culture of subordination is still pertinent for our context today. Patriarchy, described by Tribble (1989:280) as 'an institutionalisation of male dominance over women in home and society at large' is a question of the 21st century that '... needs debunking but cannot be debunked in a heated battle' (Ecumenical Visions 2013:395). It simply requires critical examination.

In an ecumenical conference I attended in 2014 in Hungary, I had to respond to a question of African culture as patriarchal as perceived by some Europeans. While this is not an attempt to respond to this question, African culture, specifically *isiXhosa* culture has become an integral part in my journey as a Christian and theologian (Kobo 2014). Some South African scholars, hold this conviction and in their work attempt to critique culture by embracing what is positive and exposing its negatives. Lebaka-Ketshabile (1995) states that African women's unique contribution to women's theologies is the importance of culture:

... they bring their whole being to the throne of theology. They bring with them their gender which is not fragile but strong, their nationality, their culture, and their socio-economic conditions; they want theology to address their whole being. (p. 48)

Masenya (1998:278) looks at sexism from two poles that is sexism in a larger society and sexism from African culture and further links racism to apartheid, which is only unique to South Africa, she argues.

Landman (2000:177–178), points us to another contending issue, that is the role of women in reinforcing patriarchy. She critiques foremothers' (the *volksmoeders*) uncritical adherence to culture, which she argues, denies them of public voice and binds them to private sphere; and how this heritage, has been later inherited by the younger generation. I find this point helpful because this article attempts to critique culture, and Landman helps us in exposing women's complicity to patriarchy, a seed of death.

In its attempt to debunk patriarchy, 21 years since the dawn of democracy, Black Theology of Liberation (BTL), which argued from its conception that race, class and gender are constructs (Ntintili 1996:4), the article adopts a 'hardline pro-black position' in a dialogue between Womanist Theology and BTL and further problematises two sites of power in *isiXhosa* culture that often have been set up as binary opposites against each other, as sources of black life (life giving sites).

A point well-articulated by Vellem (2007), in his analysis of Wright Jr. as follows:

According to Wright Jr. (1979:48) black power speaks about nature of humanity. Black power sees the end to which every aspect of human life must be directed as fulfilment. Black people want to fulfil their potential for the larger enrichment of the common life of all mankind. In order to attain personal efficacy, there need to be the presence and the building up of power. Wright Jr. maintains. (pp. 313–314)

He makes a pivotal point, namely, that:

... the Greek words for power (*bia*) and life (*bios*) reflect the essential affinity between life and power. Power is basic to life. Without power, there cannot be any life. Institutions transacting ultimate social goals must dare to be power producing repositories. These power-producing repositories are enablers, facilitating human growth toward fulfilment. Hence *The Imago Dei* in the human being must reflect God's power, His majesty and His might. Our point is that power is life giving. *Ubuhlanti* (and *Iziko/Igoqo*) thus becomes a communication of the efficacy of bio-a power space for the remaking of life (*bios*). (pp. 313–314; emphasis added)

In this article, the argument for the efficacious communication of life in the sites often abused as exclusive places for men, sites to dislocate the women, black to black dialogue is briefly discussed. This is followed by an examination of the call for the autonomous discourse of women. The article then moves on to delineate some features of isiXhosa culture to argue for the dismantlement of cultural exclusion and the dislocation of women in life affirming sites.

## Black to black dialogue

In their phenomenal collaboration, Maluleke and Nadar (2004:2–7) highlight the scarcity of real engagement between female and male black intellectuals. They argue that black men and women intellectuals engage more with their white colleagues than with each other. They suggest a number of reasons why this is the case. For example, to name a few, first the shortage of Black intellectuals and rarity of black female intellectuals works against the necessary dialogue between black women and males. Another reason, which is clearly a constant challenge, is that the contestations, disagreements and differences often attached to experiences of pain, death and injustice between women and males underscore the limitation of males in speaking on behalf of women and perhaps the need to speak with them. Notwithstanding these challenges, and by alluding to Steve Biko's 'Black person you are on your own', as an impatient call for Blacks to stop expecting outsiders to author their liberation, they assert that true liberation must be self-implicating and self-authored. This point could very well be said in the context of *isiXhosa* culture, between amaXhosa men and women. *AmaXhosa* women and men as this article argues with one specific cultural heritage in mind should engage in critical dialogue and collaboration for their liberation. We now turn to BTL so as to establish the extent in which it nuances patriarchy in its vision for liberation.

## Black Theology of Liberation, and the call for an autonomous discourse of black women

The first publication on Black Theology in South Africa (1973), edited by Basil Moore defines Black Theology as a passionate call to action for freedom, for God, for wholeness, for man. This work exposes oppression of black women as Moore and Ntwasa posit that black women suffer under a double yoke in South Africa as they are oppressed as blacks with all blacks and as women.

In the same work, Motlhabi critiques the concept of power and authoritarianism, a social structure in which some people are regarded as having the right to exercise control over the lives of others by virtue of the position they hold within the social structure. He contends that such is by no means limited to political structures but is also found in a home situation where allusion is made to Pauline's text: 'the husband is to be the head of his wife' (Eph 5:23). Motlhabi argues that here it is unimportant whether a woman is a better leader or wiser than her husband. All that is important is that there is an established pattern of authority and that the one who holds the office of husband automatically has authority over the one who holds office of wife (1973:120–121). The 'home situation' that Motlhabi points to is fundamental for this article and will be expanded later in the section on *isiXhosa* culture.

Mofokeng (1987:25) acknowledges that the issue of women's oppression had not been put into consideration for some time even though women have been in the forefront of the struggle. Stated otherwise, Mofokeng seems to suggest that while patriarchy is nuanced in the vision of BTL, the interlocation of women has however been downplayed. To this effect Mosala (1987:39) asserts that the measure of the success of any liberation struggle is the extent of the liberation of women in that struggle. He points us to the urgency of a black feminist theology as a critique to BTL. He asserts that an autonomous black feminist theological discourse is a necessity of the objective and subjective conditions of black women's struggle. He continues that it is also a condition of the successful execution of the black liberation struggle. He further argues that without such an autonomous discourse of struggle black theology is dangerously truncated. Maluleke and colleagues (1997, 2002, 2004) and Vellem (2007, 2014, 2015) are among black theologians who have pointed to the importance of liberation of women and thus autonomous discourse to which we now turn to.

## Autonomous discourse: womanism

Mosala (1987:39) asserts that an autonomous black feminist theological discourse is a necessity of the objective and subjective conditions of black women's struggle. For Mtetwa (1998:71) this discourse is a vigorous attempt by black women

1. Womanism, Black Womanism, African Feminism, Black Feminism and White Feminism are specific terms and their specificity constitutes them as affirming names. The modifications and shifts in these names reveal the evolving character of these theories. See Landman 1995; Maluleke 1997; Nadar 2009; Walker 1984.

theologians to articulate and contextualise the inseparable nature of their gender and race condition in a predominantly white, social, cultural, political and economic context. Following this, the development of womanism inspires this article and the insights cited below are helpful for our discussion:

A black feminist or feminist of color ... From the black Womanish ... Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in great depth than is considered 'good' for one. A woman who loves other women, sexually or non-sexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility ... and women's strength. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. (Walker 1984: xi–xii, in Nadar 2003:14)

As a South African Indian woman, a black woman therefore, Nadar (2003:14–15) appropriates Walker's womanism, which is of African American originality, and highlights its key features which are its focus on race and commitment to the 'entire people' as her rationale for choosing the term.

Some scholars, however, came to the term womanism independent of Walker. Emerging in the same era as Walker, Chikenywe Ogunyemi (1985:72), a womanist literary critic from Nigeria arrived at the term independently and was surprised to discover that its meaning overlapped with Walker's definition. For her Black Womanism is a philosophy that celebrates black roots, the ideals of black life, while giving a balanced presentation of womandom. About this she says:

It concerns itself with the black sexual power tussle as with the world power structure that subjugates blacks. It's ideal is for black unity where every black person has a modicum of power and so can be a 'brother' or a 'sister' or a 'father' or a 'mother' to the other. This philosophy has a mandalic core: its aim is the dynamism of wholeness and self-healing that one sees in the positive, integrative endings of womanist novels. (Walker 1985:72)

What makes Ogunyemi's womanism remarkable is what she presses as core; her conviction that gender question can be dealt with only in the context of other issues that are relevant for African women (in Arndt 2000:711). Affirmed by Oduyoye<sup>2</sup> (2001:38) who asserts that Women's theology is evolving in the context of the challenge to make theology reflect what Christians in Africa understand God to be about. Oduyoye speaks of a whole life as a context (p. 21) and further argues that the sense of community characterises traditional life in Africa (p. 34). Masenya's work is a reflection of this as well. As a South African womanist biblical scholar, she introduced the term womanist theology to South Africa (Landman 1995:145). Her analysis of the situation of black women in South Africa propelled her to differentiate herself from white feminists. She prefers calling black women who

2. Oduyoye played an integral part in the development of African Women's Theology. 'Oduyoye has worked tirelessly to ensure that women's voices and concerns have been heard ...' (Pui-lan 2004:7). She also founded the Circle of The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, which started in 1989 in Ghana but now has different chapters in South African universities. The Circle continues to be a space where liberation of women in South Africa manifests in different race and gender, with both black and white, men and women exposing patriarchy from different positions, personal experiences and contexts. See Kanyoro (2001), Phiri and Nadar (2012), Pillay et al. (eds.) (2009), *Essays in Honour of Denise Ackermann – A Feminist Theologian of Praxis*, Sun Press, Stellenbosch.

are engaged with liberation issues as womanists rather than feminists (Masenya 1995:152).

Womanism acknowledges the role of black men in helping to transform colonised black people from 'mere' national subjects to 'political subjects' (Narayan 1997:61 in Koyana 2001:65). Womanism thus incorporates the wellbeing of men who are also victims of the world power structure that subjugates black people as a whole.

An interesting critique worth noting, which the article attempts to respond to is narrated by Landman (2000:185) where Rev Purity Malinga, at a research meeting of the Faculty of Theology and Religion, Unisa, pointed to lobola as one of the reasons for violence against black women since it reduces women to the property of men and she was accused by the black men in the audience, arguing against women for using feminism to divide black into male and female.

Briefly, what is problematic about Malinga's point is the ultimate result of dividing black humanity by simply turning a blind eye to the effects of dualism with which feminism from the West is fraught. The cultural forms of knowledge in which black women are embedded without being uncritically accepted, nonetheless, constitute their experience. This article argues that black men and women do not have to see things in the same way, but they can attempt to look at them together in the manner that unites them for life giving and life affirming culture. With that in mind, we now turn to *isiXhosa* culture with the aim of looking at how their sites of power can be a source of life for the whole. We will however not romanticise *isiXhosa* culture, while attempting to look at it as the basis for life giving, we critique what is patriarchal and embrace what is positive and life giving.

### ***isiXhosa* culture<sup>3</sup>**

Africans have a very strong sense of community and believe that all things in the cosmos are interconnected. Benezue Bujo, a priest of the Diocese of Bunia, East Congo, summarises this ethic of interconnectedness in the following way:

The African person lives within an extended family. This togetherness is based on a common ancestor who founded the community of the clan or tribe, which is composed of the living as well as the dead. ...The relationship between those living on earth and the ancestors is very close, since the living owe their existence to the ancestors from whom they receive everything necessary for life. On the other hand, the living-dead can 'enjoy' their being ancestors only through the living clan community. In this way a kind of 'interaction' – hierarchically organised from top to bottom and vice versa – is created between these two communities. The goal of this interaction is the increase of vitality within the clan. No one is allowed to keep this vitality for oneself; everyone has to share it with the other members of the family and clan. This means that every member has to behave in such a way that all that is done contributes towards the development of life. And individual's failure reduces the vitality of the community, whereas good behaviour ensures the growth of life among all. (Bujo 1998:15–16)

3. In this section while reference is slightly given, due to lack of literature by *Xhosas* themselves on their culture and life, I will give more reflections from personal experience as a *Xhosa* woman, as well as conversations with *Xhosa* men and women.



The analysis above lies at the centre of every African tribe, despite differences in culture and customs. *IsiXhosa* culture too has high reverence for ancestors and the interconnectedness pointed to by Bujo, which will be highlighted below as we attempt to critically look at *amaXhosa* sites, that is, *ebuhlanti*, *egoqweni* as loci of power and life.

*Ubuhlanti* (kraal) is a place where livestock is kept. It is a site regarded with high esteem among *Xhosas*, as it is a place where communication with ancestors and life giving rituals are performed. As articulated in Bujo through his use of extended family, children in *AmaXhosa* culture become part of this family that is comprised of the living and the dead through the ritual of *imbeleko*, the slaughtering of a goat. Deliberations prior and during proceedings of the ritual (if it is a male child are held in the kraal by men in his presence) but if it is a female child or a boy who is very young, they do not enter *ubuhlanti*. For male children, what follows is *ulwaluko* (initiation school), a rite of passage which is done for boys to prepare them for manhood. For female children, what follows is *intonjane*, a rite of passage which was done by *amaXhosa* for girls to welcome them into womanhood.<sup>4</sup> In preparing for *ulwaluko* respectable men of the household and the boy concerned, gather in the kraal for meetings as well as to begin the process. Following that the boy is taken to a secluded house temporarily built in the mountain orbush, where only men are allowed to enter. This is a pedagogical space where ideally boys are taught values, spirituality, ethics, responsibility and what it means to be an honourable man.

The article argues that the credibility of this powerful pedagogical and life giving space is questionable and cannot produce any good results in its current disintegrated state. It further argues that in fact it raises a lot of ethical questions. If the premise of *AmaXhosa* is *umntu ngumntu ngabantu*, how can men claim to be whole if others are dislocated? It looks at the absence of life in boys during these important rituals and asks if there can ever be any bios when the very foundations of life are disintegrated?

The article points to irreconcilable contradictions and a dualistic power structure presented and maintained by *ubuhlanti*, a sanctuary, a sacred space and a symbol of unity, as rituals are performed to connect the living and the departed, lobola negotiations whose aim is to unite families were traditionally held there and umbilical cords are buried in the kraal; if only men are custodians and women prohibited from this site (Gcingca-Ndolo 2008:19; Samuelson 2007:55). The prohibition of women supported by biological reasons that no one has control over but God, i.e. menstruation which renders them unclean to enter this sacred space and there is a claim that menstruation hinders expansion of livestock. Myths of witchcraft cited sometimes to justify this act. What unity can men claim to foster in the absence of women?

*Ubuhlanti* is a site of economics in a traditional *Xhosa* home, the size of the kraal, and the number of cattle it entails is a sign of wealth and good welfare. 'Cattle were the glue of

this society and the primary markers of status and wealth' (Samuelson 2007:55). The article bemoans the dislocation of women from economics and power and concludes that patriarchy can no longer be defended if it upsets life. It calls for the restoration of the vitality of the community through the renaissance of *ubuhlanti*, which according to Vellem (2007:321), is a point where every fragmentation that exists in a household is restored. As it is 'the *habitus* of the living dead who hold all spheres together responsible for the satiation and security of *ikhaya*'.

## Egoqweni/eziko – a patriarchal site?

This is a space culturally allocated to women,<sup>5</sup> associated with roles such as minding the kitchen, child birth and rearing, and running of the household. Marked by *indlu enkulu*, literally translated a 'big house', which was regarded as a sanctuary where certain rituals were performed, life delivered and nurtured. Traditionally childbirth took place in this house, and children and men were prohibited from this space. The only people allowed to enter during childbirth were the midwives.

It is a sacred space, known for its warmth, where fire is always burning; where food is prepared and families gather for meals, and prayer, where storytelling and education took place. This was mostly a pedagogical space for a girl child, who was taught and socialised from birth how to speak soft, walk and behave in a certain manner and how to be a woman, a wife and a mother; as opposed to a boy child whose teaching became a father's responsibility, who taught him from birth to be masculine, strong and to be a leader. Boys were taught *indoda ayikhali* (a man does not shed tears, as it renders him a weak being).

This article argues that it is in this regard a patriarchal site that undermines cultural richness of *isiXhosa* culture. The dichotomisation of spaces by dislocating women from *ebuhlanti*, a governing, ethical artefact of *amaXhosa*, a place where economics, politics, spirituality and faith of a black home reside, and allocating them *egoqweni/eziko*, where even the patriarch rules, leaving the woman completely disempowered maintains a dualism of power structure that is irreconcilable. How much of *bia* have women lost in their 'space'? And how does this impact on *bios*?

Patriarchy violates life of a child that is brought up in such disintegrated spaces where she/he has to learn to preserve the status quo. What then is life for a boy that is dislocated from *egoqweni* and taught to be nothing less than masculine? How does it help us in producing responsible men that do not rape, physically abuse and assault women and children? What is life for a girl that is brought to know that her place is with her mother and learning house chores? Does that not speak to single parenthood? How does it help us to save our girls from spending their lives compensating for absent fathers by seeking comfort in a series of abusive relationships?

4. Due to limitations of the scope of this article I will however only focus on *ulwaluko*. For insights on *intonjane* see Kobo (2014).

5. Since women were not custodians of the kraal, *eziko/egoqweni* became their designated space.

How do we reconcile the fact that as women we are accomplices in a patriarchal power game, playing right into the hands of patriarchs? Protecting men even to the detriment of our fellow women and children? How do we explain a situation where children are sexually assaulted by their fathers and all their mothers could do is to be silent?

How do we reconcile the fact that our great grandmothers had they been empowered they would have instilled values of humanity and antiracism to Afrikaner children whom they practically raised in the absence of their parents, contrary to nurturing racists that grew up to abuse their husbands and children? This failure is arguably a result of rigidity of patriarchal power in their spaces.

The allocation of women to this space, where the venom of patriarchy manifests itself in various forms with disintegrated structures of *bia* that upset *bios* has rendered it a prison, and a site of death. Where even the fire in the fireplace that was meant to warm up homes, produce light, and cook has been extinguished, leaving nothing but smoke and ashes...

## Towards the recovery of 'the vitality of the community'

Patriarchy, earlier defined as 'an institutionalisation of male dominance over women in home and society at large' (Trible 1989:280), undermines the bonds of unity between *egoqweni* and *ebuhlanti*, between *ulwaluko* and *intonjane*, the binary, bifurcated spaces. By arguing that the exclusion of women from the kraal is a disruption of life, and the patriarchalisation of *egoqweni* as venomous the article proposes a womanised recovery of life as an anti-venom and possibility for the reconciliation of *bia* and *bios* in black life. To reiterate Vellem's analysis of Wright Jr.'s earlier point 'Black people want to fulfil their potential for the larger enrichment of the common life of all mankind. In order to attain personal efficacy, there need to be the presence and the building up of power. Wright Jr. maintains. He makes a pivotal point, namely, that: ...the Greek words for power (*bia*) and life (*bios*) reflect the essential affinity between life and power' (2007:313–314).

If there is to be any life for the whole, which preserves the sanctity, unity, economics, spirituality of these sites, the agency of women cannot be downplayed. There is an urgent call for a dialogue. *Umntu ngumntu ngabantu*.

## Conclusion

In attempting to look at BTL 21 years since the dawn of democracy, this article adopted a 'hardline pro-black position', a heed to a cry for 'the scarcity of real engagement between female and male black intellectuals' (Maluleke & Nadar 2004:8); in a dialogue between Womanist Theology and BTL. And it further problematised two sites of power in *isiXhosa* culture that often have been set up as binary opposites against each other, that is *ebuhlanti*, *egoqweni* as loci of power and life.

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The author declares that she has no financial or personal relationships which may have inappropriately influenced her in writing this article.

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