


Ukunyamezela yinkunzi: Exploring the perspectives of God in relation to our daily bread

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Dates:

Received: 17 Apr. 2024

Accepted: 18 May 2024

Published: 19 July 2024

How to cite this article:

Penxa-Matholeni, N., 2024, 'Ukunyamezela yinkunzi: Exploring the perspectives of God in relation to our daily bread', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 80(2), a9864. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v80i2.9864>

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Multiple interpretations of Matthew 6:11 have arisen among biblical scholars. This article aims to delve into the understanding of God in relation to the concept of 'our daily bread' as perceived by black women in the townships of Cape Town. Through the utilisation of indigenous storytelling methodology, this study will not only address the question of how the concept of 'our daily bread' contributes to the oppression of black women but also juxtapose it with the broader discourse surrounding the concept, *Ukunyamezela yinkunzi* (loosely translates to 'perseverance is the key'). Furthermore, the indigenous storytelling methodology will uncover the nuanced experiences of black women concerning their perceptions of God within the context of their everyday lives.

Contribution: This article contributes to the literature on African studies by highlighting the experiences and indigenous connections of black women. It offers a close cultural reading of the text, providing deeper insights into their unique experiences and traditions.

Keywords: African spirituality; black women; daily bread; God; indigenous storytelling methodology; Matthew 6:11; township theology.

Introduction

In many Nguni languages of Southern Africa, the term *ukunyamezela* is frequently spoken, particularly among women. In isiXhosa, *ukunyamezela* signifies perseverance, while in isiZulu, it is articulated as *ukubekezela*, carrying the same meaning. In this discourse, an additional term, *ukunyamezela yinkunzi*, as indicated in the title, is introduced, emphasising the importance of perseverance as a pivotal attribute in navigating life's challenges. This concept, alongside the biblical reference of Matthew 6:11, holds significant relevance in understanding the experiences of black women – a term defined early in this text.

Here, 'black women' refers to the historically marginalised demographic in South Africa, enduring layers of oppression and subjugation, even within their own communities. Throughout this article, the question addressed is: How does the notion of 'our daily bread' contribute to the ongoing oppression faced by black women? To explore this inquiry, an indigenous storytelling methodology is employed, chosen for its ability to unveil the intricate cultural dynamics and nuanced daily realities of black women residing in the townships of Cape Town, South Africa.

The scripture verse in question will be linked with *ukunyamezela*. The Self-location and Methodology sections are set to provide a context for the lenses through which the text will be interpreted. As an indigenous researcher, it is imperative to situate oneself within the narrative. Hence, subsequent insight into the author's own positioning within this discourse will be provided. Self-location and the methodology chosen for this article are discussed to aid the reader's understanding of why the biblical text and *ukunyamezela* are interpreted as they are. The discussion primarily focusses on unpacking the concepts of *ukunyamezela yinkunzi* and 'give us our daily bread', forming the core of this article's body. Finally, conclusions and findings derived from this exploration will be presented.

Self-location

Self-location is a fundamental practice across various qualitative research methodologies, especially in indigenous research where it holds significant cultural importance (Kovach 2009). Kovach (2009) emphasises that indigenous researchers position themselves within their cultural context to highlight their relationship with their experiences, culture and indigenous epistemology, thus culturally situating themselves. According to Kovach et al. (2013), indigenous methodologies are

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shaped by the indigenist paradigm(s) and serve an introductory relational function. This function, often observed in oral addresses among indigenous peoples, involves acknowledging place, elders and community, signifying respect and facilitating community connection (Kovach et al. 2013).

It is crucial to recognise that in indigenous methodology, there is a fundamental belief that knowledge is relational (Wilson 2008). This perspective views knowledge as shared among all aspects of creation, extending beyond human interaction to include animals, plants and Mother Earth. Consequently, knowledge transcends individual understanding and encompasses the concept of relational knowledge. Self-location, therefore, not only indicates one's relationship with the phenomena under investigation but also underscores the researcher's accountability to all relations during the research process.

Personal self-location is vital in contextualising the researcher within the narrative of the participants, fostering an understanding of social realities within relational frameworks. For instance, I identify myself as Mbathane, Xesibe, MaGxubane, daughter of Ntoyi Penxa and Tizana Mtshakazana, tracing my lineage through my father and my mother's clan names and familial connections. This practice, reminiscent of the biblical concept of a 'great cloud of witnesses' (Heb 12:1, NIV), underscores the interconnectedness of individuals within their cultural and familial networks. As a black South African woman, I embody the perspectives of black marginalised communities, shaping the interpretation of this article.

Methodology

Indigenous methodologies, as articulated by Rigney (1999) and Wilson (2001), offer a unique approach to research grounded in indigenous knowledges, emanating from place-based community wisdom through an organic knowledge system process. This indigenous knowledge system, passed down through community knowledge holders, has been extensively explored by indigenous scholars since the latter part of the 20th century (Deloria 2004; Ermine 1995; Little Bear 2000). Central to indigenous methodologies are indigenous knowledge systems, characterised by descriptors such as holistic, inclusive, animate and pragmatic.

In this article, storytelling is the focus as an indigenous methodology. To contextualise this approach, it is essential to consider the following definitions. According to Wilson (2008), 'indigenous methodology' denotes relational accountability, wherein the researcher is accountable to all relations throughout the research process. Additionally, Chilisa (2012:12) outlines four aspects of indigenous research, of which I highlight two: (1) indigenous research centres on local phenomena rather than relying solely on Western theories and (2) it emphasises sensitivity to context, creating locally relevant designs, methods and theories derived from indigenous knowledges and experiences.

Wilson (2008) further underscores that indigenous research methods critically evaluate research practices within indigenous cultural contexts globally, emphasising the interconnectedness of all things and the importance of cultural codes, values and behaviours (Smith 1999). The relationality of indigenous methods encompasses ontology, epistemology and axiology, as explained by Chilisa (2012).

It is within this framework that the indigenous storytelling methodology emerges. Stemming from indigenous research, storytelling as a method aligns with the oral storytelling tradition inherent in indigenous paradigms (Kovach 2010). Moreover, Riessman (2008:4) suggests that narrative permeates various forms of expression, including myths, legends, folktales and more. Building on this notion, indigenous storytelling encompasses a wide array of cultural practices, including *umxhentso* (traditional dance), *iingoma* (traditional songs), *iintsomi* (folktales), clapping of hands, naming rituals, metaphors, proverbs and more (Penxa-Matholeni 2022a, 2022b, 2023).

Life in the margins: *Ukunyamezela Yinkunzi*

The consequences of universally applying Western gender theories are such that the diverse experiences of women and young women in non-Western societies, including their struggles, negotiations and resistance against various forms of not only patriarchal oppression, but social and racial oppression and domination, often remain overlooked (Fennell 2009). It is therefore that the experiences of women in general are not one-size-fits-all.

As previously mentioned, the concept of *ukunyamezela yinkunzi* or *ukubekezela* in isiZulu translates to perseverance. It is noteworthy that among the amaXhosa and amaZulu, this concept is primarily associated with women. The only association this concept has with amaXhosa males is during initiation school for boys, where they are expected to shout *ndiyindoda* [I am a man] instead of crying after undergoing circumcision. The significance lies in the expectation for men to demonstrate power, strength and masculinity as individuals, as highlighted by Penxa-Matholeni (2020).

For women, however, this concept refers to the challenges they face because of external factors. For example, it is often invoked when a woman enters marriage and encounters difficulties within the union. In such situations, when seeking counsel from elders, if they advise her to *ukunyamezela yinkunzi* or *kuya bekezelwa emtshadweni* [isiZulu meaning to persevere in the marriage], it signals to the woman that she is expected to endure the hardships without further intervention. This imposes a double standard on women, who are expected to endure and tolerate intolerable situations alone. In contrast, men in such marriages are not obligated to endure, and if the woman is considered the instigator or is deemed infertile, men are often encouraged to take another wife. Any resistance from the woman is often questioned, and she may be deemed as having an inadequate upbringing.

The prevailing notion is that *emzini kuyanyamezelwa* [isiXhosa, meaning one must persevere in the marriage], thus implying that enduring abuse and hardship within marriage is expected. In households where the woman is not working, she depends on the man to provide for their daily sustenance.

This concept extends beyond the confines of black communities and infiltrates their workplaces, reflecting life on the margins. In these spaces, individuals not only struggle for sustenance but also for recognition and a voice. They are forced to tolerate racism and workplace harassment, including sexual assault, because of their economic vulnerability and the need to provide for their families.

Historically, domestic workers in South Africa have been subjected to marginalisation based on their race, gender, socioeconomic status and limited education. Discriminatory legislation entrenched their inferior status, and they were often treated with suspicion and mistrust by their employers. Despite recognising the mistreatment, domestic workers endure and persevere because of economic necessity and a historical perception of themselves as inferior. *Ukunyamezela* thus becomes a way of life for them. Many domestic workers reside in their employers' homes, where they are subjected to physical, psychological and emotional abuse. This oppression remains largely invisible to the public eye, occurring within the confines of private residences (Mkandawire-Vallmu et al. 2009). Despite the hardships, domestic workers continue to persevere as they are economically dependent on their employers for their livelihoods. Consequently, the concept of *ukunyamezela* serves to normalise and perpetuate their oppression.

Life in the margins: 'Give us our daily bread' Matthew 6:11

This article does not aim to provide a theological analysis or textual exegesis, as I am not a biblical scholar. Instead, it interprets the text as understood by marginalised amaXhosa readers, focussing on its implications for black South African women.

Scholars such as Kobo (2017), Dube (1997, 2000, 2004), Claassens and Birch (2015), Muller-Van Velden (2023) and others have extensively discussed the misinterpretation of biblical texts to suppress women. However, the focus here is on understanding how this text fuels the oppression of black women and the connection between the concept in question and the text itself.

Dube (2004) observes that the margins are where one grasps God; it is in the messiness of life and at the margins where one meets God. How then do the margins grasp the Lord's prayer as it appears in the text in question?

In a discussion titled 'Starting from the Marginalized Lives' between Hirsh, Olson and Harding (1995:194) and philosopher of science Sandra Harding, cited in Penxa-Matholeni (2022b:8),

it is argued that true objectivity is achieved not by excluding social factors from the construction of knowledge, as the Western scientific method suggests, but by beginning the investigation from the lived experiences of those marginalised in the production of knowledge – in this context, black (South) Africans. Dube (2004) concurs, stating that reading the Bible from the margins involves clinging to God amid struggles and oppression, as Jesus illustrated in his parables, which resonate with the lives of the poor and marginalised, such as tax collectors and prostitutes. Therefore, my approach is grounded in understanding the verse in question from the perspective of black South Africans.

As mentioned earlier, this scripture verse is taken from Matthew 6:9–14, known as the Lord's prayer, where Jesus was teaching his disciples how to pray. In many Christian traditions, this prayer holds a pivotal role in Sunday services. In the townships of Cape Town, South Africa, amaXhosa congregations sing the Lord's prayer as a ritual, regarding it as a foundational prayer and the foundation of the service.

To comprehensively link the concept of *ukunyamezela* and Matthew 6:11, it is beneficial to include the verses before and after the verse in question. The prayer begins in verse 9, addressing God as 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name' (NIV). The verse in question is verse 11, 'give us our daily bread' (NIV), followed by verse 12, which reads 'and forgive us our sins, as we have forgiven those who sin against us' (NLT).

For the women singing the Lord's prayer every Sunday, addressing the Father (a man) in Heaven and asking for forgiveness while continuously enduring oppressive situations in marriages, verse 12 can be interpreted as another burden to bear. To these women, enduring hardship and forgiving those who trespass against them seem like an endless cycle of suffering. Gqola (2015) effectively articulates this by asserting that violent masculinities instil fear in women, leading to the tolerance and rationalisation of violence.

The verses mentioned not only instil fear but also perpetuate the concept of *ukunyamezela*, reinforcing the idea that forgiveness is necessary to receive forgiveness. Consequently, various forms of violence are tolerated not only because of *ukunyamezela* but also because forgiveness is required for those who trespass against us.

Everyday violence, as described by Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois (eds. 2004), encompasses behaviours occurring in diverse settings such as households, workplaces and interpersonal interactions, resulting in both physical harm and psychological harm. For example, withholding wages in workplaces can be regarded as a form of everyday violence. Domestic workers tolerate such abuses not only because they are expected to forgive but also because they rely on their employers for their livelihoods, epitomised by the plea in the Lord's prayer for daily bread.

In colonised spaces, women not only bore the yoke of colonial oppression but also faced the imposition of two patriarchal systems. Black South African women, in particular, experienced triple oppression based on race, gender and class, as noted by Kobo (2017). This triple jeopardy further exacerbates the challenges faced by black women in navigating oppressive systems.

Give us our daily bread

Kobo (2017) contends that these women are cognisant of their circumstances, yet their prayers do not encourage them to resist or be mindful of the structural causes behind their challenges. Instead, prayer serves as an avenue of escape for them, rather than empowering them to protest and resist against the systems of their oppression.

Understanding ‘Give us our daily bread’ in relation to employers

‘The child of the farm owner and the child of the farm worker should have an equal opportunity to become a Matie’ (The vision of the late Professor Russel Botman, Rector and Vice-Chancellor of Stellenbosch University, cited by Claassens & Birch [2015], in the dedication section).

The quote underscores the disparity in economic power, particularly evident in South Africa. Historically, these employers or farmworkers and or slave owners held positions of religious and economic superiority. One might ponder: to whom then do these women refer as the provider of their ‘daily bread’? Is it God through the employer? Do both employers and employees appeal to the same God for sustenance?

Cone (1985) addresses this inquiry by highlighting the stark contrast in the lives of black slaves and white slaveholders. Despite the occasional use of similar religious language, their experiences were fundamentally disparate. For the slaveowner and the enslaved within that societal context, life often entailed the perpetuation of white cruelty to extreme extents, including the enslavement of Africans and the eradication of indigenous peoples. Conversely, the life of the enslaved revolved around harrowing realities such as the slave ship, the auction block and the oppressive plantation system. Their existence lacked conventional avenues for self-assertion. Consequently, when both master and slave invoked the concept of God, they were unlikely referring to the same spiritual reality. For the slave, expressions about Jesus Christ emerged from a place of profound suffering, despair and the relentless struggle against an inhospitable world.

Therefore, ‘give us our daily bread’ holds a literal significance for many black South Africans – it represents the next meal literally. For many women in those Sunday services, it is about securing essentials such as milk, bread and electricity for the day.

Understanding ‘Give us our daily bread’ in relation to gender

Findings from the literature demonstrate that violence can severely impact women’s physical, mental, sexual and reproductive health and may increase the risk of acquiring HIV in certain settings (Enaifoghe et al. 2021). This form of oppression not only affects women’s health but also their economic livelihoods. Dube (2004) highlights that in colonised spaces, women bore the yoke of colonial oppression and apartheid, as well as the imposition of two patriarchal systems. One of these systems is a religious yoke that subjugates women.

The Lord’s prayer leads the reader to reflect on the identity and status of the God to whom they pray. As a father in heaven, His name is to be honoured. This resonates strongly with black amaXhosa married women, who are often financially dependent on their husbands and adhere to cultural norms where they must honour their father-in-law by refraining from addressing him by name or any similar term. This dynamic places women in a position of subjugation, echoing the patriarchal structures within society. Consequently, this verse leads them to endure situations that may be intolerable, as they rely on their husbands for their daily bread.

Mphaphuli et al. (2021) assert that lobolo, a customary dowry, is perceived as an assurance that certain expectations and duties will be fulfilled in marriage, including enduring intolerable situations. Therefore, women may feel obligated to accept their circumstances with gratitude, as they believe they can only receive because they are expected to be grateful.

Oduyoye (as cited in Penxa-Matholeni 2020) elaborates that when a black African woman adheres to societal expectations and accepts an inferior role, she is reassured and feels grateful for the benevolence shown to her. However, if she exhibits self-confidence and demands equality, she is often perceived as a threat by those who benefit from her subordination. This dynamic is evident in her home, workplace and even within the church community.

Reimagining ‘Our daily bread’ in the context of black women’s oppression

Dube (1997) asserts that the biblical narrative invites readers to identify with it and manifest its teachings in their own lives. The biblical story, being unfinished, transcends the confines of scripture and inscribes itself upon the Earth, allowing various readers from different historical moments to interpret its meaning and implications. Mosala (1989) argues that God and Jesus cannot be separated from politics and culture, raising questions about whether the slaveowner and the slave pray to the same God. Historical evidence suggests otherwise.

As Maldonado-Torres (2007:243) observes, colonialism and apartheid persist in various aspects of daily life, including literature, academic standards, cultural norms, beliefs, self-perceptions, aspirations and consciousness. These ideologies also infiltrated spiritual and religious hierarchies, with scripture being used to justify white supremacy. Consequently, how can black women pray to the same God as their employers or male counterparts, who perpetuate oppressive systems and benefit from their subjugation?

Perhaps it is time to embrace what Vellem (2013) terms 'Kasie theology' or what Penxa-Matholeni (2024) calls 'Township theology' – a theology that envisions a God who transcends the confines of traditional religious structures. This theology recognises a violently loving God who stands in solidarity with marginalised cultures and refuses to be confined within the pages of the Bible. Vellem (2018) refers to this as a 'spirituality of woundedness', which draws upon African values and rejects the notion of a passive, submissive God.

Amoah and Oduyoye (2010) assert that God permeates all aspects of life, including politics, experiences of oppression and cultural and social contexts. Perhaps, as suggested by Smith (2010), it is time to bury the God introduced by colonisation and apartheid to black South Africans. Smith's journey in 'Mamelodi hy het sy God gevind' (meaning, he found his God in Mamelodi) symbolises a personal transformation, signifying the death of ancestral beliefs and a new understanding of God's presence in his life.

Exploring black women's understanding of the concept of God: Revealing the Sankofa philosophy

To do justice to this section, it is essential to backtrack. Unlike Smith (2010), whose journey to finding his own concept of God requires the demise of the traditional one, our exploration leads us back to the pre-colonial and pre-apartheid era of the black African God. What better method to achieve this than by tapping into the rich tapestry of African indigenous teachings, manifested in various forms? Here, I employ the Ghanaian symbol of the Sankofa bird, emblematic of a philosophical framework that traverses time – past, present and future – a cycle reiterated throughout life's journey (Dube 2024). This symbol encapsulates a return to one's roots for rejuvenation or historical reflection, fostering the attainment of renewed or novel aspirations. According to the Sankofa philosophy, birds maintain immaculate plumage through the application of oil from their tails, symbolising the necessity of utilising wisdom and experiences from the past to propel oneself forward.

What was the understanding of the concept of God pre-colonial and pre-apartheid era? The Sankofa philosophy is going to help us look back and retrieve the spiritual wisdom we left along the way (Penxa-Matholeni 2024). In Africa, spirituality is central and perhaps the most important aspect

in the lives of Africans. In fact, Mthethwa (1996, in Louw 2008) mentions that African spirituality pervades and permeates every facet of the life of African people and therefore cannot be examined in isolation. Instead, they must be examined conjointly. This means that there is a profound interconnectedness with not only each other but also with animals and Mother Earth. This interconnectedness is shown in the instructive viewpoint of Africans; the indigenous education process covers all spheres of life: spirituality, commerce, agriculture, weather, medicine, preservation of the environment and so on. The women were at the forefront of advocating for environmental issues (Penxa-Matholeni 2020). This era was very matriarchal and patriarchal; both women and men were leading cultural and spiritual rituals. In fact, Penxa-Matholeni (2024, in press) narrates the story of Nongqawuse – a young woman and prophetess of amaXhosa, whose uncle was her assistant, who went out to tell the villagers about her prophet. This is a testament to the equal relationships that exist among all individuals.

The concept of God for Africans is not fragmented; God is an everyday presence in every aspect of their lives. The God who dwells among them literally, where there is no building for deity or a portrait. The African concept of God or spirituality is not something that one wears on Sunday and Wednesday night in the bible study, but each person embodies that God. The concept of God in the African way, where God is interconnected to everything the Africans are connected to. This is the God who is very deep in the political life, cultural life, social life and economic life of the oppressed. The understanding of the concept of God, therefore, is what Dube (2006:146) defines as the concept of community, which ought to and should become the cornerstone of propounding African indigenous theology of justice and liberation by constantly revisiting 'what it means to be community and to live in community', 'what violates community' and 'how we can live in community in our new and hybrid 21st-century contexts'. Being a community is not and cannot be a one-time thing – rather, it is a process that must be continually cultivated by its members. This approach should inform the continual assessment and review of all oppressive relationships and the re-imagining of communities that respect and empower all its members regardless of class, gender, age, ethnicity, race, sexuality and nationality for it is only then that we can say, 'I am because we are, and we are because I am, your pain is mine and mine is yours' [*umntu ngumntu ngabantu*]. That is the essence we must reclaim – a God whose vastness surpasses the confines of scripture, transcending antiquity to dwell in the complexities of the 21st century. It is imperative to dismantle the image of God imposed upon us by the legacies of colonisation and apartheid in South Africa.

As Smith (2010:4) poignantly expresses, 'how can one continue to believe in a God who stands by as those professing faith in Him allow black people to perish in the psychic gas chambers of the townships?' (Smith 2010:4, translated from Afrikaans). This lament echoes the urgency of reassessing

our conception of God, One who resonates with the realities and struggles of contemporary society.

As Kinoti (1997:118, in Musili 2024:82) asserts the heart of morality is community consciousness, self-centred individuals might exist side by side, but they cannot build up a cohesive society. The societal ideals of peace, unity, harmony and goodwill can only be nurtured by a society whose individuals not only cherish but also promote community-sanctioned moral values.

This is a dream of black African women in the margins as Oduyoye (1995) puts it in her poem:

Dream, Girl dream!
 What is the future going to be?
 Dream, girl dream! What we may become is what matters.
 What dream? Africa's dream, of the least of the world permissible dreams.
 Dream, for the other, is you turned inside out.
 Make the other strong, and you will be strong.
 We shall all be strong together.
 Dream, girl dream! Be a woman, and Africa will be strong. (p. 35)

Conclusion

This article finds that black women face intersecting forms of oppression stemming from colonialism, apartheid, patriarchal systems and biblical texts. These oppressive structures not only manifest in social, economic and political spheres but also permeate religious and spiritual contexts.

It was found in this article that Matthew 6:11 together with the concept of *ukunyamezela* put more oppression and perpetuated oppressive systems, such as apartheid. The imposition of Western Christianity by colonisers and apartheid regimes has reinforced patriarchal norms and upheld white supremacy. Therefore, there is a need for theological frameworks that resonate with the lived experiences of black women and offer avenues for liberation and empowerment. Concepts such as 'Kasie theology' and 'Township theology' emerge as alternative narratives that centre the experiences of the marginalised and envision a God who stands in solidarity with them.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that she has no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced her in writing this article.

Author's contributions

N.P.-M. is the sole author of this research article.

Funding information

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Data availability

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article.

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