

The experiences of women within Tswana cultural history and its implications for the history of the church in Botswana

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Abstract

This article critically discusses the place of Botswana women within the Tswana tradition and how this has been carried over into the life of the church in Botswana. The article argues that these women have been marginalised and discriminated in various ways by the very system that should have protected them. Generally, their context, whether it be the social, the religious, the economic, the political and the religious, worked against them in every aspect. The article observes that these dimensions of life, which included the religious practices and beliefs, the various political structures and traditions, and so forth, worked against the development of women. Traditional laws and power relations worked towards disempowering women. All this was readily endorsed and accepted as normal by the missionaries. What made matters worse was the fact even the most powerful *badimo* (ancestors) were believed to favour men at the expense of women. More discouraging still was that the church seemed to endorse this status quo as normal.

Introduction

The traditional Tswana status quo, which was governed by certain laws and norms, was biased against women. The place of women is socially constructed in the same way – whether it be among the Barolong, Bakgatla, Bakalanga etc. – they are socially constructed as inferior and as subject to men. Women are not only disfigured and categorised as less capable than men, but are also seen as playing a menial role in society. The article therefore sets out to identify some of the major historical processes which variously influenced gender relationships. I shall do this by identifying the underlying major religious, socio-economic and political structures which seem to have discriminated against women (Moffat 1842:67). The *badimo*,

the ancestral spirits, were, for instance, identified in particularly male promoting ways. They were seen as dominant and as absolute sources of power, and it was they who ordered laws and customs. This not only subordinated women, but also gave divine justification to male superiority and created a complex worldview which was invariably conceived in terms of the powerful and superior male (Mackenzie 1871:397). These social processes seriously affected gender identity, and obviously weakened women's position in society. The use of terms such as "the position of women" and "the place of women" refer to their gendered roles and position in society. In this respect, language can be seen as a source or a reflection of dominance/gender identity. For example, the word "forefathers" (*borramogolwane*) does not have a female, opposite equivalent. Proverbs, those powerful, wise sayings, which are often considered infallible when employed in the socio-economic and political spheres of life, tend to marginalise women. For example: "mosaditshwene", "monna selepe", "motho ke motho ka batho" are used to reinforce society's perceptions. It may be argued also that women themselves perpetuate these gender imbalances (e.g. an infertile woman is rebuked by her fellow sisters (*moopa*)).

Background: The pre-Christian experience

As I have said, women were traditionally regarded as inferior to men in Batswana society. At social gatherings and feasts this is clearly evident, because men and women not only sat apart, but men were given a better reception. Certain spots, such as the *Kgotla*, were normally reserved for men. These traditional distinctions were many. The political arena itself had no place for a woman. Only men were generally ordained as chiefs and headmen. In the sphere of economic production, there is also a well-defined division of labour, with tasks traditionally allotted according to sex. Feminine chores are treated as inferior to those of their masculine counterparts. But the family is the basic institution in society responsible for producing healthy members of that society (physically and psychologically). Women are traditionally excluded from political debates and from holding political functions and offices, just as they are debarred from officiating at religious ceremonies. *Bongaka* (medicine), like *bogosi* (kingship), is essentially a male occupation. Legally, customs of inheritance, *bogadi* (bride-wealth), marriages and divorce etc., all discriminated against women. As will be seen, acquisition and ownership of property was predominantly a patrilineal affair. Daughters, sisters and wives were, therefore, historically and traditionally, excluded from any form of inheritance, which kept them economically dependent on men. What is interesting is that the early missionaries, who also came from a patriarchal society, did not see anything wrong in allowing the same mindset to continue in the life of the church.

Robert Moffat (1842:66-67) described the cultural position of women as follows:

While going to war, hunting, watching the cattle, milking the cows, and preparing their furs and skins for mantles, was the work of the men, the women had by far the heavier task of agriculture, building the houses, fencing, bringing firewood, and heavier than all, nature's charge, the rearing of a family.

The greater part of the year they are constantly employed; and during the season of picking and sowing their gardens, their task is galling, living on a coarse, scanty fare, and frequently having a babe fostered to their backs, while thus cultivating the ground.

The men, for obvious reasons, found it convenient to have a number of such vassals, rather than only one, while the woman would be perfectly amazed at one's ignorance, were she to be told that she would be much happier in a single state, or widowhood, than being the mere concubine and drudge of a haughty husband, who spent the greater part of his life in lounging in the shade, while she was compelled, for his comfort as well as her own, to labour under the rays of an almost vertical sun, in a hot and withering climate. Their houses, which require considerable ingenuity as well as hard labour, are entirely the work of the women, who are extremely thankful to carry home even the heavier timbers, if their husbands will take their axes and fell them in their thicket, which may be many miles distant. The centre of the conical roof will, in many houses, be eighteen feet high, and it requires no little climbing, in the absence of ladders, for females to climb such a height; but the men pass and repass, and look on with the most perfect indifference, while it never enters their heads that their wife, their daughter or their mother may fall and break a leg or neck.

While standing near the wife of one of the grandees, who, with some female companions, was building a house and making preparations to scramble by means of a branch on to the roof, I remarked that they ought to get their husbands to do that part of the work. This set all into a roar of laughter ... and several of the men drawing near to ascertain the cause of the merriment, the wives repeated my strange, and, to them, ludicrous proposal, when another peal of mirth ensued. Mahuto, who was a sensible and shrewd woman, stated that the plan, though hopeless, was a good one, ... It was reasonable that women should attend to household affairs and the light parts of labour, while man, wont to boast of his superior

strength, should employ his energy in more laborious occupations; adding she wished I would give their husbands medicine to make them do the work.

As Robert Moffat rightly observed, the building of mud huts was mainly women's work. They are responsible for digging the foundation, raising the wall and fetching the grass for thatching the house. In addition to this, women spent many hours working in the fields. With a baby strapped across their backs, they hold the plough as they follow the oxen, while men walk alongside swinging their whips to urge the oxen on. When the grain begins to be ready for harvest, the women have to scare away flocks of birds that can very rapidly lay a whole field bare. When the crops are ready, the women harvest and thresh the grain with long sticks to remove the wheat from the chaff and then load the grain into sacks. What this means is, that women remain on the lands, tilling the soil, hoeing etc, until after harvesting is completed (Procek 1993:1). They often compose and sing songs as they toil in the fields to directly or indirectly express their dissatisfaction and complaint to the men. One of these songs says: *Mmammata mpelegele ngwana yona ke lema ke le nosi*, which is a cry for help with the baby she carries on her back as she spends long hours ploughing. Notwithstanding their message, these songs are sung to the rhythm of the work to make the labour easier. Through these songs the women publicly express displeasure at and have broken the cultural etiquette that imposes silence on women.

From childhood girls are socialised in a manner that befitted womanhood. They are taught to be loyal, obedient and polite. They learn to do household chores in preparation for responsible womanhood, to enable them fend for their families in the future. They are therefore "groomed" for marriage, childbearing and caring for family members, especially male relatives and the husband. After marriage, they take the responsibility for the raising and training of children. During pregnancy and childbirth, women have to ensure that all the ceremonies and taboos necessary for the wellbeing of the child are strictly observed. They have to ensure that their children receive the medical care dictated by custom. She also has to ensure that the children are properly fed and decently clothed. She also instructs her older daughters on womanhood and other related expectations of motherhood. As a mother, she is blamed for whatever goes wrong with the girls. She is expected to be a role model for younger women in the community. This training involves waking up at dawn to sweep the yard, fetching water, collecting firewood, and preparing porridge for the family. Through all these activities, women make a major contribution to the life of their community. Athaliah Mokolomme (1996:101) thus rightly observed that women have always made, and continue to make, a significant contribution to traditional arable agriculture. They are the main producers of food. The problem is that, despite this longstanding involvement in community

productive projects, their contributions were never considered to be of much economic significance. Tswana tradition attached no prestige and status to activities carried out by women. Furthermore, while women exercised some amount of authority in household affairs, the family institution generally showed the dominance of male culture. What was the justification for this attitude? Were these activities unimportant compared with the roles of men, who were decision-makers and believed to be courageous and protectors of the family? How was this reconciled to African spiritualism? What it means is that activities are borne of ideas.

The value of boy/girl child

Naming ceremonies

Tswana names such as *Seapei* (the one who cooks) *Khumoetsile* (source of wealth through *bogadi*), *Segametsi* (the one who fetches water), *Seanokeng* (the one who fetches firewood) tended to associate women with domestic chores, as if women are not expected to perform public duties. These names are contrary to those given to men, which are associated with success and wealth and which therefore enhance their social status. Some of the examples are names such as *Mojaboswa* (heir), *Kgosietsile* (the chief has come/is born), *Mmerekhi* (the worker), *Mmusi* (the leader or ruler), *Mokganedi/Modisa* (shepherd).

It is worth noting that there is an obvious and deliberate gender differentiation in the instructions given to boys and girls right from the time of birth. The care and training of children, for instance, made a clear social distinction as to the status of boys and girls from their birth. Setiloane (1976:35) stated this very clearly, saying:

But as the child grows, the role of its parents, as formers of character and as disciplinarians, increases. There is an intense concern for educating the young in the ways of their ancestors, that they also may transmit the same ways to their descendants. Jealously watched by *badimo* and undertaken out of love for the child and for its ultimate welfare, this is the duty of every parent. There is little systematic teaching. Under parental supervision, education takes place ... through association with other children. Together, boys herd the sheep and goats and, later, the cattle; and girls fetch water and take charge of their younger siblings.

The birth of a boy, especially a first born, usually brings great excitement to the family and relatives. The family ancestors, who are seen as special guardians, are also believed to favour sons. The birth of a boy is important because males are essential for the continuity of the patriarchal lineage. It is in the interests of the *badimo* to make their descendants feel their presence. This is why a wife who gives birth to sons is favoured, whereas the one who fails to do so makes the marriage of a second wife necessary.² Related to birth is the naming of children which, in many instances, is a male affair. At times, especially in the case of a son, the name is chosen from his lineage. The naming, therefore, also turns out to be patriarchal and thus strengthens the status and position of sons at the expense of daughters. Boys are expected to possess the good traits from their father, uncles, forefathers etc.

As part of this essential tradition, therefore, gender distinctions are instilled in the minds of the youth. From childhood a girl is socialised in a way that befits the woman's role, as a housemaker (e.g. fetching water, collecting firewood, tilling the soil and winnowing) and food producer and is also taught to be polite and obedient. The Setswana proverbial saying, *Lore lo ojwa lo sale metsi* (its easier to bend a twig when it's still fresh before it becomes dry and easily breakable) and a host of many other wise sayings, typically argues the necessity of correct or appropriate gender values being systematically transmitted to the children. This means that children should be taught certain gender roles required by their society at a young age. Women were basically taught to be subordinates. This custom ensured that boys and girls began to behave as their fathers and mothers respectively. Boys, for instance, began to do such things as cattle herding at an early age, while girls specialised in learning household and agricultural activities, such as fetching water and firewood, threshing corn, preparing food, sweeping out the huts and nursing babies (Willoughby 1909:228-245). Feminine training and qualities subjected women to the home and household duties and consisted of values that subordinated women, and denied them any political and religious status. Moffat (1842:361-362), for instance, wrote:

They have reached nearly to a climax in their life, for they expect soon to be married, and to be a mother they considered the chief end of a woman's existence.

Initiation ceremonies

Initiation rites, known as *bojale* (for girls) and *bogwera* (for boys), are a further basis for social gender distinctions. Setiloane (1976:35) points out

that: “Active participation in ritual introduces them to the basic values of their society and to correct emotional attitudes to animals and crops.” This practice has serious implications for women, because it is one of the processes through which society confers upon its members a distinct social status, which means different things for women and men. While the *mephato* (regiments) translate youths from the life of childhood onto the threshold of adulthood, it does so within certain gender parameters. It emotionally moulds and conditions young people according to the cultural patterns. These patterns subordinate women, and also strengthen the authority of patriarchal leadership by imparting to boys male deifying social values. Men are introduced to the supreme right of the adult male, as being the only ones who could communicate directly with *badimo*, who are an integral part of people’s lives. This gender distinction therefore promotes male superiority. Willoughby (1928:200) writes as follows:

... agriculture is peculiarly woman’s domain: girls pass into womanhood by rites which centre round the fertility of the soil; women vaunt their devotion to tillage; men, when they work upon the land, profess to be helping their women-folk. Cattle, on the other hand, are associated with manliness, glory, and political power ... Boy’s puberty rites are shot through and through with the care and defence of cattle; ... and even chiefs boast of their skill in herding; while women are debarred from milking cows or even entering a cattle-pen.

It is at the age of puberty that the youth undergo such educational training and only after this procedure has been successfully completed can marriage become a possibility. It is unheard of for parents to allow their son to marry a girl who has not undergone such a practice. In fact, uninitiated men and women are despised and considered incomplete. Such people can neither marry nor participate in the counsel of men and women because they are “still children” and unfit for such activities (Setiloane 1976:38). Robert Moffat (1842:250) points out that, children born of such parents cannot be heirs to regal power. John MacKenzie, after his ten years of missionary labour among the BaNgwato, having carefully studied their culture, also tells us about such a condition, saying:

No single ceremony has a wider significance; it may be said to introduce the youth to heathen manhood, with all its duties and responsibilities. No honourable marriage could take place with a man who had not gone through the bogwera or initial ceremony (Mackenzie 1871:375-6).

MacKenzie's observation was substantiated by Robert Moffat, who was very unsympathetic towards Tswana culture, but who saw a strong relationship between these initiation practices and the impact of marriage on women:

Their youth, for instance, would forfeit anything rather than go uncircumcised. This national ceremony is performed from the age of eight to fourteen, and even to manhood, though the children born previous to their parents being initiated cannot be heirs to regal power. There is much feasting and dancing on the occasion and every heart is elated at these festivities. The females have also their *boyali* at the same age, in which they are under the tuition of matrons, and initiated into all the duties of wives in which it merits notice that passive obedience is especially inculcated (Moffat 1842:66).

It has already been pointed out that the traditional Tswana status quo very clearly demarcates the proper roles of men and women. In fact, there are some cultural limitations to ensure that sexes do not trespass each other's boundaries. If a man performs duties perceived as feminine, it would be said: "*O jesitswe*" (he has been bewitched, especially by the wife). But what happens if a woman performs male tasks? It is not as bad. In the *bojale* training sessions, as Moffat points out, girls are equipped for roles which culture regarded as feminine, such as household duties. The phrase *ke monna or mosadi tota* (you are a real man or woman) denotes that gender expectation. It expresses the social expectation of manhood or womanhood, hence the saying, *mosadi mosala gae moleleo o setime*. The word *mosadi* literally refers to one who remains at home or one who remains behind when men go on hunting expeditions. These were cultural expectations. A Tswana saying such as *Ga di ke di etelelwa ke managadi pele', di ka wela ka lemema* emphasises the point that female leadership will only bring confusion.

Bogwera is a symbol of masculinity. This is why male activities and their version of education were seen to be more prestigious than female ones. In addition to the practical education offered by the *bogwera* schools, the boys were introduced to what was seen as male status, such as the tribal laws and traditions, decision-making procedures and political and administrative matters, at both the family and the national level (Mackenzie 1871:375-9). Boys were also equipped with necessary skills enabling them to cope with military combats courageously. This cultural expectation of masculinity for men and femininity for women was acknowledged by Robert Moffat (1842:362) who wrote:

It seemed impossible for men to yield. There were several instances of wounded men being surrounded by fifty Bechuanas, but it was not till life was almost extinct that a single one would

allow himself to be conquered. I saw more than one instance of a man fighting boldly, with ten or twenty spears and arrows fixed in his body ... The men struggling with death would raise themselves from the ground and discharge their weapons at any one of our number within their reach: their hostile and revengeful spirit only ceased when life was extinct.

The picture described here is accepted to be manly. A man was trained to die as “a man not a woman”. However, in spite of all the biased preparations and training given in favour of men, women were unfairly accused of cowardice. Moffat (1842:361-362), for instance, wrote that: “... instead of flying, generally sat down and, baring their bosoms, exclaimed, ‘I am a woman, I am a woman’.” Although this assertion by the missionary reflects his value judgement and needs considerable modification, this reaction was to be expected, bearing in mind the nature of training which had been given to these men, and the cultural expectations of women.

One other male activity, which is seen as a significant source of food, wealth and superiority, is hunting. In the past, large hunts were organised at key moments in society’s life cycle. (For example, when a special animal was required for ritual purposes such as rainmaking, or if certain special animal materials were needed for the inauguration of a king. A leopard skin, for instance, was used as an insignia that denoted kingly political status and authority.)

Cattle breeding and herding is also a crucial male activity because of the higher social status attached to that industry. The importance given to this contributes to the high value given to the birth of boys (rather than girls). This is because cattle herds belonging to families without boys tended to decline due to lack of proper management. The livestock industry itself, especially cattle, is not only important for economic purposes, but also for marital and religious functions (e.g. rainmaking). Needless to say, these functions are primarily male-dominated. In addition to this, cattle serve as an important source of meat, milk, and leather products which form an essential part of the people’s diet and clothing respectively. This is why cattle became a symbol of social power. A man with cattle is able to acquire as many wives as he could economically support. On the other hand, it can be argued that cattle served as a medium of exchange. Cattle-related activities were superior to food gathering and cooking, which were generally feminine activities. Other feminine duties included hoeing, reaping, and weeding, scaring birds away, with the help of girls and children, and threshing corn with heavy wooden sticks. Also included was gathering of some forest food, such as the *morethwa* (wild berries *grewia flava*), which was preserved by drying and then stored for future use. This was often used for making traditional beer (called *khadi*). Women also collected other edible roots and fruits, such as the *morula* tree fruits (also used for making

various kinds of drinks) and other wild greens, which supplemented their normal daily diets (Schapera, 1974:24). In 1896, when the BaNgwato were poverty stricken, due to drought and the rinderpest, the Ngwato women spent most of their days digging roots of the *Motlopi* tree, while the men did all they could to save their cattle.³ These feminine roles historically remained inferior activities. Regarding this trend, Adam Kuper (1982:13) has observed that:

Gathering, a female activity, was devalued as a source of food; it was the resource of the pauper. Women had to gather firewood, however, and indeed the wife's duty to provide firewood was stressed in wedding ceremonies.

The exclusion of women from certain economic activities such as hunting, ownership of cattle, etc., systematically continued to strengthen men's traditional position. In fact, the traditional structures as a whole contributed to the social status and promoted patriarchal superiority. Acquisition of cattle, which was itself closely associated with wealth and dignity, subsequently enabled men to marry many wives which, in turn, increased their chances of having more children, especially highly sought-after sons. Another factor which perpetuated the social status of men was the availability of the *bogadi* (bride wealth) practice.

*Bogadi practice (bride wealth)*⁴

Exchange of *bogadi* is an imperative requirement, and the one that legalises conjugal unions. This essential mandate demands that the *bogadi* cattle be transferred from the bridegroom's family to the bride's before the feasts, marking the women's relocation to the husband's home.

The institution explains why cattle breeding were entirely an extremely important male activity. Its largest contributors were the son's father and his uncle, while the major benefactors, among the woman's family, were the maternal uncles and their brothers. This factor sustained their economic strength, the benefit of which was inherited by their sons. Women – wives and their daughters – continued to be disadvantaged.

It is a usual practice for young cows or oxen to be given, but never bulls, because they possibly symbolised male strength. Cows were preferred because they were thought to symbolise the reproductive ability expected of the woman. The handing over of *bogadi* is done before sunrise. The bridegroom, demonstrating his manhood, drives the cattle to the kraal of his in-laws and remains at the entrance of the kraal, while negotiations go on at the *Kgotla*. The fact that negotiations take place here, as opposed to the house, symbolised the masculine sphere of influence.

The transfer of *bogadi* gives a man considerable power and control over a woman. It gives him the legal right to chastise her freely whenever she failed to fulfil her traditional obligations. Wives, however, could not reciprocate. It also transferred the woman's legal and productive powers to her husband's family, and limited the rights of the woman over her children (if the marriage ends in death or divorce). For this reason a man could refer to both his wife (or wives) and children as *bana bame* (my children), indicating that he controlled them in everyday life and that she is always subordinate to him and his male relatives. In recent years, the feminist movement in Botswana has vigorously challenged this system and is seeking justice.

Notwithstanding the fact that Batswana society provides legal channels as protective measures against abuse, which means that the woman can appeal to her-in-laws in the event of a dispute, she could not withdraw from her marital obligations; she could not refuse conjugal relations, and nor could she fail to prepare food for her husband. While the consequences for a woman found guilty of failure to honour her marital obligations could result in her losing of custody over her children, the punishment of a husband found guilty of a similar offence is always light in comparison (Schapera 1953:170; Roberts 1972:21).

Another way in which the *bogadi* practice facilitates men's economic prosperity, while depressing women's, is the fact that a man can acquire a wife with the cattle received from the marriage of a sister. To expedite this process, the culture has deliberately created strong relationships of economic dependence between the household leader and his sisters.

The other factor which encourages male domination within this practice is that a man who does not give *bogadi* has no legal rights over his own children. He also loses prestige in the community. In addition to his undergoing constant pressure from his wife's parents, it is also seen as a shame to the woman herself. A married woman is regarded as being more honourable in this society. This makes marriage and therefore *bogadi* very attractive. *Bogadi* is a symbol of permanent security and help to the man's mother, from her daughter-in-law. It also is a source of prestige because it gives the male elders a measure of control over the young man, who is entirely dependent on them for marital resources. These younger men are, therefore, not expected to accumulate their own economic resources, nor fulfil matrimonial obligations on their own.

Upon the death of a barren or childless woman, the payment of *bogadi* justifies a replacement of the wife by a very close relative, usually her sister.⁵ There is usually no attempt to ascertain the cause of barrenness. The woman is automatically blamed, and even charged with promiscuity before marriage. This is manipulation. The status of women largely depends on their fertility, especially the birth of boys, which is a crucial factor in their husband's social identity and esteem. In fact, a barren woman is considered a half woman, because a real woman can bear children. Why should a woman's marriage

depend on bearing a son for the husband? What is wrong with girls? Is this just? Females are cursed before they are born. No father wants to have a female child as first born. This is believed to prove that a man is not manly enough to “make” a son. As a result of this cultural expectation, no father or mother wants to have all his/her children to be girls, since this will depict failure, especially on the part of the woman. Society expects a wife to produce heirs, heirs who will continue the family lineage after the death of the parents. It remains a mystery why it is always the woman who is blamed for the biological problems leading to barrenness. Barrenness is so serious that the woman actually suffers social stigma associated with it although, of course, it may not be her fault at all. To make matters worse, if a woman is found to be barren, the family brings her sister or another female relative into the compound to bear and raise children for the man. In fact, this is a way of “proving” that the woman is barren. If the wife’s family fails to bring a substitute wife, she will suffer divorce, which is a social scandal in itself. The substitute stays in the same compound as the “barren wife”, and is thus a constant reminder of the woman’s “failure”. This increases her suffering and is obviously a form of emotional abuse. It is for the same reason that this practice is used to justify the *seantlo* practice (levirate/substitute marriage). A woman married with *bogadi* is expected to have sexual relations with a member of her deceased husband’s group and raise offspring for the perpetuation of the latter’s family line. This custom denies the widow the right to decide her own future.⁶ In the case of a man’s infertility, an arrangement is secretly made to bring in another man to raise children with the wife for him. In most cases, this man is a very close relative (thus ensuring that the secret remains in the family).

While the *bogadi* practice is seen as a crucial economic asset, the transactions are a tangible expression of developing ties with affiliated families (Schapera 1970:138-147). The initiative of choosing their son’s first wife (Setiloane 1976:30), followed by the fact that the major donors and recipients of *bogadi* are males, therefore becomes a controlling cycle for wealth through giving and receiving. Through this process, women can be seen as being used to create wealth in order to maintain the status quo. In some instances, *bogadi* is no longer seen as a simple token of appreciation, but as buying a spouse, hence Tswana wedding songs like: *Se nkgapele mosadi, ke mo rekile ka dikgomo* (do not confiscate the wife I have bought with cattle). The exchange of *Bogadi* is an important element through which a woman enters the life of motherhood, which is understood to be a way of achieving her status. It seals the agreements reached by the two families.

In spite of this obvious cultural bias against women, it has to be observed that, while the *bogadi* practice involves a complex social transaction, it does have positive aspects (Kuper 1982:3, 26). The origin of the practice had good intentions, which were to make people’s local socioeconomic conditions adaptable. It was through this that extended families corporately took

responsibility in marriages, and did not simply represent the interests of the male population alone. Despite its function as a mechanism for supporting male domination and “superiority”, the practice can in no way be termed as an acquisition of wives for cattle. One of the strengths of *bogadi* is that it discourages divorce.

Inheritance rights

The laws of inheritance are influenced by the fact that Tswana traditional society is predominantly patrilineal. Family membership and descent is exclusively traceable through the name of their male leader's agnatic ancestor. This also means that inheritance is passed from the father to the eldest son, or any other legitimate male family successor.⁷ While the other sons get smaller shares, women receive nothing substantial, which means that they remain economically dependent on men. On the other hand, women cannot dispose of their share of the cattle without their husband's permission. Even when the deceased man has no male offspring, the inheritance is passed to the nearest male agnate (Schapera 1953:37-43; Schapera 1938:28f).

Through the custom of *tshwaiso* (earmarking of animals to someone), sons begin to acquire cattle long before their marriage; in most cases, this is not true of daughters.

Generally, land and other forms of property are traditionally subject to male ownership and management; women may only use them with the consent of men. This is possibly because only the husband has the legal right to acquire land in a patrilocal residence. At her matrilocal residence, the woman can only use the land allocated to her father. On the death of her husband, she is entitled to occupy her husband's dwelling, but if she decides to return to her descent group she can only use her father's land. Following divorce, a woman can only take household property, which is associated with a woman's social role. All the other major property, such as land, cattle etc, naturally becomes the husband's property. Tswana culture is thus highly discriminatory against women. Put simply: women have no land rights.

The following sections explain how male authority is continually elevated, at family level, in matters of government, and in religion and ceremonial practices.

Societal norms

Family life and structure

As observed above, the family leadership structure is patriarchal in nature and practice. This male headship or guardianship is viewed as divinely inspired and natural. In a polygamous household, for instance, wives are ranked in order of

betrothal. The first wife chosen is regarded as the senior wife. Her eldest son automatically becomes heir to his father's status and property. Daughters and their mothers are completely left out. On the death of a father and husband, respectively, women were again made to be economically dependent on their male relatives. This was a systematic process designed to preserve the status quo from one generation to the next.

Patriarchal leadership is also evident in the extended family, which is led by the eldest male member of the household. It is under the leadership of this male elder, supported by other men, that family functions such as marriage negotiations and other discussions and domestic events are organised and performed. Closely related to the organisational structure of the family is the residential structure. From a functionalist perspective, the family plays the role of nurturing, socialising and performing certain economic functions. The question is: what sort of people (men and women) can we expect to come out of this type of family?

Basic roles

Gupta (Dube 2003) says that there has always been a distinct difference between women and men's roles. He says that these determine the way men and women access productive resources outside the home and the form decision-making authority takes in society. He argues that men are seen as responsible for the productive activities outside the home, while women are expected to be responsible for reproductive and productive activities within the home. Furthermore, he points out that women have less access over control of responsible resources such as land, cattle and farm activities than men. This has been confirmed by Dube (2003), who has argued that, through very basic roles, we find that gender does not distribute power equally between men and women. Women are constructed primarily as domestic beings, belonging to the home and kitchen. They are mothers, wives, dependent on the property of their husbands, brothers or fathers. This picture is very true for traditional Batswana culture.

Residence

The residential pattern also promotes patriarchy, in that tradition demands that sons establish their homesteads in their father's ward. It is therefore a traditional expectation that women will leave their father's ward or village following marriage to live in their husband's home. Furthermore, the marriage arrangement is not only patrilocal, but customarily engenders patriarchal heads with immense administrative authority over women at every level. As part of this process, taking matrilineal residence after marriage was strongly disapproved of and socially stigmatised as a sign of a man's weakness. He is seen as

being “owned” by the woman (Schapera 1956:chp. Xvi; Roberts 1972:16). In this patrilineal system, families are also traced through their fathers alone. Families with the matrilineal residence are ignored, or even treated as alien (Willoughby 1928:382). The allotment of private land for residence and cultivation only rests with patriarchal household heads. These have serious economic implications for married women and female-headed households.

The marriage institution

One of the key elements of a family is the marriage institution. It has always played an important role in the relationship between men and women. This can be adequately understood by examining the following issues:

Formation for marriage

The choice of a man’s first wife is a male-dominated affair, because marriage is seen as a means of continuing the patriarchal lineage. The most important function of a wife is thus child-bearing, in which the production of boys is a crucial factor (Brown 1926:58-65; Willoughby 1923:46-138). No one is excused from getting married. Every father expects all his sons to continue his family lineage (Schapera 1956:28-29). A woman who deliberately chooses to remain single is not only virtually unknown, but is also an embarrassment, and a shame to the community. But the question might be asked: Which is better: a hungry, free person or a well-fed slave? A woman who stayed single was regarded as refusing to fulfil the fundamental duty of child-bearing. This is why the old maids, the unmarried old females, are known as *mafetwa* (those who have been passed by) and was the worst form of social stigma a woman could have. *Mafetwa* are regarded as bad luck. They are not to touch children, lest they pass their bad luck onto them. Other women do not want to associate with them. A woman who remains single is also considered immature, irrespective of her age (was an unjustified form of indoctrination). For example, she is never involved in marital negotiations (*patlo*), although her married peers and younger sisters will participate in such activities. This environment makes marriage prestigious and desirable to every woman, because it is only marriage that makes the female a “real” woman. From this perspective, the ideal of the “wise sage” applies only to men. Women were forced to see themselves through the eyes of a biased society. And, of course, unmarried women remain economically dependent on their fathers, brothers or uncles.

The embarrassment of a woman remaining under her parental authority, therefore, gave marriage an enhanced social value. This is why every woman wanted to get married: she would become a mistress of her own household,

bear children for her husband and escape the disgrace. But isn't this a vicious cycle of power relations?

In matters of authority, a woman must submit to her household head, normally the father if unmarried, to her husband if she is one of the "lucky ones", or other family head, depending on her circumstances. Whether they get married or stay single their status remains unchanged; they do not have a right to make their own independent choices. At every level a woman has no power to make decisions on such matters as whether or not to work outside the home, have children or use contraceptives. Men are in control within and outside the family sphere.

Betrothal negotiations

Traditionally, the choice of the bride and all the betrothal arrangements rests with the man's parents, especially his uncle and father. The girl's consent is taken for granted. Her parents can choose a suitable spouse for her without consultation and she is expected to honour their choice. The word generally used for the process of negotiation was *patlo* (betrothal negotiations). The girl herself is referred to as *sego sa metsi*' (the one who fetches water for the family for domestic use). The process and the terminology used basically express the purpose for which the bride was sought – to bear children and serve the new family in a host of domestic duties. While this undermines the status of a woman, other women envy her all the same.⁸ The agreement between the two families is a legal guarantee of the marriage. John MacKenzie tells us how *Kgosi* (King) Sekgoma of the Bangwato, in 1857, had arranged a wife for his elder son Khama, saying: "Before his banishment, Sekhome (sic) had desired his eldest son [Khama III] to take to wife a daughter of Pelutona; ..." (Mackenzie 1922:109).

This system is of considerable political significance. Through this, Sekgoma wanted to create strong ties with his political allies such as Pelotona, a prominent headman and *ngaka*. Regarding this, Eugene Casalis (1861:186-7), a French missionary among the BaSotho, also writes:

The marriage of all the wives is contracted in a similar manner; but a very marked distinction exists between the first and those who succeed her. The choice of the great wife (as she is always called) is generally made by the father, and is an event in which all the relations are interested.

The preliminary negotiations and agreements meant that the prospective husband has the right to freely visit the woman's home and cohabit with her. This has serious implications if the man decides to terminate the relationship at this stage, when he has fathered children by her. The Tswana law only

demands that he pays compensation for the spoilt marriage prospects and maintenance of the child. This, however, amounts to a meagre six head of cattle.⁹ If the relationship is terminated by her death, her place is, at times, taken by her younger sister or another relative, especially, if *bogadi* has been given (Roberts 1972:42-3).

While the impregnation of an unmarried woman by a man other than one betrothed to her generally resulted in the termination of marriage agreements, a man impregnating a woman did not necessarily suffer the same fate. For a woman, this is a lasting, shameful social stigma. This state of affairs also jeopardises the family name, and is a negative advertisement of the single women of that household. The woman further becomes a victim of the tradition which states that the father has a legal claim over her children. This is justified on economic grounds because, so “the argument” runs, the woman has no resources of her own. The term used for a woman who, for one reason or another, remains unmarried but engages in an adulterous affair with a married man is *nyatsi* (concubine).¹⁰ The wife or wives are not expected to question the whereabouts of the husband if he decides not to spend a night at home. The Setswana proverb *Monna thotse o a nama* (literally meaning a man is like a seed, he spreads his branches everywhere) gives men licence to practise concubinage. The people who fall prey to this practice, are mostly unmarried women, especially *mafetwa*, divorcees, and widows, because they are traditionally deprived of economic resources. The *bonyatsi* system entails a flow of gifts from a man to reciprocate his *nyatsi's* hospitality. She, in turn, looks to him for help with the building of a house or the provision of psychological security and spiritual needs, in addition to economic benefits.¹¹ The alternative is to turn to her father's household for these resources. While it is a supportive relationship, it ties the woman to that patriarchal economic power, influence and identity.

Despite such immense pressures and disadvantages, the traditional system makes it very difficult for women to revolt. Some of the historic factors which maintain the status quo are discussed below:

Polygamous marriages

While the traditional marriage is patrilocal, it is also potentially polygamous.¹² In such marriage relationships, patriarchy is strongly felt. While each of these families are part of several different households, living side by side, they culturally acknowledge a common male elder, who unites them to a common grandfather. This male elder coordinates important domestic events and activities such as marriage negotiations, feasts and clearing of new fields (Schapera 1953:40). Sekgoma, for instance, is said to have been endowed with

supernatural power and was therefore a uniting figure for his royal family. He also used his economic power to acquire a number of wives and thus support his social status.¹³

The ranking of the wives of a polygamist creates a problem in matters of inheritance and the distribution of household property when the husband dies. This is why it is referred to as *nyalo ya lefufa*, meaning that it encourages jealousy and witchcraft among women. The law gives the man a superior position to his wife or wives. He can decide to marry another wife or have a concubine and the wife or wives have very little say in the matter. The sayings: *monna selepe o a adingwana* and *Monna poo ga a agelwe lesaka* – simply means that a man cannot be confined to one partner. It is culturally expected and permitted – the wife can actually send children to call him from his concubine’s house. On the side of a woman, adultery is a serious matter. The husband can send her back to her parents and may even claim damages for her behaviour. This, of course, leads to “mumblings”, but only “mumblings”, since women simply do not have the right to speak their minds (Northrup 1995:9).

For a deeper understanding of the concept of polygamy and how it affects women, a broader definition is needed. According to Maillu (1988:1), a polygamist is simply a man who is married to more than one wife, and who lives with all his wives at the same time. In his definition Maillu gives the impression that only men can be polygamists. He says nothing about women. His position is supported by what we find in most African societies, of which Batswana are a part. In these societies, polygamy is reserved for men with high economic, political or social status. It shows manliness and the fact that wealth belongs to men, while women are generally dependent on brothers, fathers, husbands and uncles for their day-to-day needs. It is for this reason that *bogadi* was only given by the groom’s parents in the form of cattle and crops. In the past it was the wealthy and powerful men who could afford to have more than one wife. Polygamy also improves or strengthens the economic and political position of men. To this extent, Altman and Ginat (1996:90) state that:

... because families are often holistic economic units, with men, women and children engaged in fishing, agriculture, animal husbandry, or trade, the more hands the better. Wives are central to the economic viability of families in traditional cultures because they often do a great deal of the work, and they bear children, who also contribute to a family’s pool.

Despite this, Altman and Ginat also point out that a polygamous marriage leads to conflict, competition, jealousy and a variety of other stresses. To solve this problem, the Batswana introduced sororal polygamy (marriage of sisters by the same man) on the assumption that sisters may be interpersonally compatible, live and work together in harmony. This, it is hoped, helps to overcome the

jealousy caused by polygamy. Needless to say, in most cases sororal polygamy simply damages sisterly love (Altman & Ginat 1996:92).

It must however be pointed out that, in household affairs, women have a lot of influence and recognition. Compounds were generally known by the name of the wives. Each wife was known by the name of her first child. If the first child's name is Tebogo, the compound will be referred to as *Ko ga Mma – Tebogo* (at Tebogo's mother's place). Women are, in fact, bosses in their own kitchens. Tlou and Campbell point out that a polygamous husband is expected to build a house and allocate some cattle to each wife. According to these authors, he could not take back the cattle without the permission of the wives. The wives also had the right to own fields in which they grew sorghum, millet, and water melons etc. In spite of this, polygamous marriages do not only complicate the inheritance procedures among males, but further uses inheritance to the disadvantage of women.

Adultery and divorce

During the period under discussion far fewer marriages ended in divorce than is currently the case. However, the population figures of the mid-twentieth century reveal that there were more divorced women than men in Batswana society.¹⁴ One obvious factor that contributes to this is the fact that, historically, the grounds for divorce were always different for men and women. For men, the grounds for divorce are the wife's infidelity, barrenness, sorcery, refusal or failure to perform domestic duties and other acts society regarded as insubordination on the part of the wife.¹⁵

Divorce is not a pleasant option for women, because customarily, there are adverse consequences associated with it. Whenever divorce occurs, the rights to property and the custody of children are granted to the man, who also keeps most of the valuable property. A wife could not divorce her husband on the grounds of infidelity and cruelty, unless his behaviour was excessive. In fact, women are expected to persevere in the face of marital problems.

A male adulterer was liable to pay damages to the aggrieved husband. Failure to fulfil this requirement could lead to the woman being divorced.¹⁶ However, in the case of a male offender, the wife has no such legal redress or protection against her husband's unfaithfulness. Divorce for a woman also has shameful consequences, because it means returning to her father's home without any property or children and, once again, coming under the guardianship of a member of her own family group, who subsequently becomes responsible for her maintenance. Such a woman is treated with suspicion. She is regarded as being incorrigible, and having gone beyond her husband's control. Her economic dependency is also socially demoralising. Like polygamous marriages, divorce works in favour of men.

Government, politics and kingship practices

At a territorial level gender distinctions are fundamental to most social, political, economic and religious institutions. Central to these, for the Batswana, are the *Kgotla* (the national council of all men) and kingship institutions.

Kgotla institution

Generally speaking, the political sphere which consists of the *Kgotla* institution, the council for all men, excludes women. The *Kgotla*¹⁷ is a forum in which state matters and disputes are debated and settled. It is the scene of power and important decision-making. This follows the substance of a well-known proverbial Tswana saying that – *Kgosi ke kgosi ka batho*, (government for, by and of the people), which stresses the need for people’s virtues, open consultations and democracy, but excludes women. The tragedy of this tradition is the fact that it aims at preserving the past cultural heritage of the people, the wisdom and knowledge of the forefathers, and therefore keeps immense power in the hands of men. Whilst it completely excludes women from its debates and deliberations, it deals with crucial matters of public policy, which have unprecedented binding authority on all (Willoughby 1928:179). This is despite its basic, well-known principle/saying: *Mmualebe o bua la gagwe*, which translates as “there is freedom of opinion and fundamental right of participation”. This right of freedom of opinion is restricted to men and, although debates are very democratic, the traditional laws, and policies proceeding from them, are merely imposed on women. These male views, ideas, experiences and thought patterns are often biased against women, in favour of men, because the experiences of women are simply ignored, or modelled under categories created and appropriated by men.

The traditional *Kgotla* institution denies women many fundamental rights, such as the right to voice their opinion on matters that have a direct effect on their lives and their children (Mackenzie 1871:371; Moffat 1842:230). It further marginalises women to child-bearing and domestic functions, while men are closely associated with the political structures which are seen to require thought, knowledge, and strength. This presents men as all-knowing and primarily creative (Thompson 1827:101). Furthermore, the *Kgotla* is seen to be a holy spot or sacred place, which is another reason why women are not permitted to enter it (because they could defile it). However, if they do enter the *Kgotla*, they sit on one side and men on the other, possibly because they are “impure”. Women have therefore kept their views to themselves, since they are not allowed to attend the *Kgotla* meetings. In fact, in most cases what women say is seen as of little sense or value. Although laws promulgated at the *Kgotla* are binding on all, women have no right to express their views; in fact, a

woman is not allowed to argue with a man/husband; if she does, she gets a serious beating.

Kingship practices

Traditionally, women take no public part in the government of the tribe. All political offices are kept exclusively by men. In fact, as we have already seen above, the *Kgotla* itself is reserved for men and is inaccessible to women. It is not for women to question the decision made by men at the *Kgotla*. They have to abide by those decisions, whether they are in favour of them or not. They are expected to remain quiet and humble towards men in general. They are particularly not expected to take part in discussions in the presence of men. The historical traditions and writings of early observers indicate that people looked to their king in all social matters.¹⁸ The information given by the woman Thathlhone to Willoughby in 1901 is revealing:

I have said that the chief is the centre of everything done in the Bechuana tribe. They called the chief their God. If the chief spoke to a person, he (the person) assented by saying, "Yes, my God." This is the assent of a mo (Tswana). Their expression "my God" does not mean the chief is really God, it means that he is their superior ... He is the one who can pray for them to God, because, he is the first born.¹⁹

Because of cultural attitudes that worked against women, and the dominance of patrilineal descent in the formation of political authority, most of the Batswana rulers were men (Willoughby 1923; Mackenzie 1871:371-3). Robert Moffat writes: "Each tribe has its chief or King, who commonly resides in the largest town, and is held sacred because of his hereditary right to that office" (Moffat 1842:66).

Patriarchal seniority, which is the yardstick for assessment of status, is generally accepted as a norm. In public assemblies, such as initiation ceremonies, meals and formal discussions, the order of precedence is always observed. Qualities such as bravery in war, eloquence in *kgotla* debates, knowledge of public laws and other affairs, are basically relevant to men only, and through these they gain high social status and respect (Willoughby 1928:227-9). Women are excluded from these activities, which are the key to obtaining social prestige and political power. In fact, no woman is expected to govern others, and certainly not to be the ruler of men. It is unheard of to have a female leader, hence the saying: *Ga dinke di etelelwa ke manamagadi* (women never lead in the presence of men). This only demonstrates that women had few rights.

As has already been discussed above, it is the descendants of a particular family who constitute the aristocrats of the nation. The BaNgwato, for instance, claim their descent from a remote past, from which King Mathiba (c.1780-95) is the most celebrated royal ancestor. This criteria to political leadership completely leaves women out of any considerations, because all these offices are based on patriarchal legacies. In the nineteenth century, there arose a serious conflict between Macheng's mother and Sekgoma because of her attempt to try to get involved in political matters.²⁰ Among the Bangwaketse, Ntebogang was the first woman to challenge the status quo. She fought until she won the support of the majority of the population and ruled as a regent until her son was of age (Morton & Ramsay 1987:21). This shows that a woman only held political office on rare occasions (e.g. when she acts as a regent to a rightful (minor) male heir).

The Tswana proverbial saying: *Kgosi ke kgosi ka e tsetswe*, (kingship is inherited not acquired) basically refers to men, because women are generally debarred, by Tswana law, from acquiring this highest political office (Lloyd 1895:76; Seaver 1957:58). The office of chieftainship is always to be acquired by men. Women do not qualify for it partly because it is associated with bravery and courage, and women are considered to be too weak to occupy this position. Weakness is believed to be an attribute of women, while bravery and strength are attributes of manliness. Physical strength is here confused with the power to rationalise, that is, brain power. Of course, there is nothing wrong with female leaders. The problem is that society is constructed in a way that undermines women and sees them as weak and unwise.

Traditional law

Tswana traditional laws are generally known as *Melao Ya Tlholego* (natural laws) because they are believed to have been divinely instituted by *Modimo*, (God given or sent) from the time that man himself came into being. Willoughby (1923:99) writes:

When Bantu speak of law, they mean an unwritten law (like our common law) that never was made, that has always been in force, and that exists only in the minds of people.

These laws are carefully transmitted by word of mouth. In the *bogwera* (the boys' initiation) schools, for instance, young men are, among other things, introduced to the traditional law and administration. Sekgoma understood the role of Christianity as working towards alienating his young men from this essential training, which resulted in his objecting to Christianity (Mackenzie 1871:412). He tenaciously clung to these customs and laws, believing that they were directly given by his forefathers. However, the disruption of the *bojale*,

the equivalent school for girls, did not worry him much (Mackenzie 1871:396-397). Looking at the role of religion as a source of life and meaning, one could argue that Sekgoma's attitude was justified. But the nature and function of Tswana law and customs are, therefore, seen in terms of male dominance, and exposes women to a variety of exploitative measures. These laws are created in such a way that they are of benefit to the very persons (the males) who transmit and enforce them.

Religious norms and relation to social practices

In this kind of patrilineal society the *badimo* (ancestors) of the man's family are seen as responsible for the health of the community. They maintain a tight grip on the community and have acquired a prestigious position as territorial deities. Their prominence is especially felt when their descendants defeat invaders, have good rains, good harvests and such. This is why most religious rites are performed by the family head, village head, chief or King. Males are vital actors in the religious ceremonies which are central to the people's life. Willoughby (1928:1) observes that:

Bantu life is essentially religious. The relation of the individual to the family, the clan, and the tribe, politics, ethics, law, status, social amenities, festivals all that is good and much that is bad in Bantu life is grounded in Bantu religion.

Patriarchy is basic to this religious structure. The king and his national *dingaka*, who are always men, are at the centre of religious beliefs and practices. Again, women are excluded from officiating at any of the principal sacrificial rites, such as rainmaking, fertility of crops and those rites inaugurating war etc. Sekgoma I, as a *ngaka* himself, was always supported by a class of male *dingaka*, like Pelotona, in conducting religious activities, such as rainmaking rites (Mackenzie 1871:380-381).

Rainmaking rites

Traditional rainmaking practices reveal that there is a close connection between the functions of kingship and *bongaka*. Whenever there is drought, people do not hesitate to hold the king and his national *dingaka* (*baroka ba pula* – that is, professional rainmakers) responsible. The people insist that it is the king's divine responsibility to give them rain because, traditionally, only selected men are endowed with skills of rainmaking. Every royal son and those of *dingaka* are taught these rainmaking skills as part of their heritage. Even in this essential training, daughters of the royal and *bongaka* families were not considered at all (Willoughby 1923:36-40; Mackenzie

1871:381-3; Schapera 1971). The description of this practice, by John MacKenzie, clearly states that these *dingaka* are predominantly men. He writes that:

As *ngaka* or priest the chief is supported by a class of men (*dingaka*) who not only practise the art of healing but are professors ... and have taken degrees in rainmaking. In Shoshong there are a good many of this influential class (Mackenzie 1871:381).

The traditional African version of *bongaka* cannot be understood and analysed from the western perspective of professionalism. Unlike in the West, it does not categorise people into pass or fail. Schapera, who agrees with Mackenzie, also points out that:

Rainmaking was everywhere held to be an attribute of the chieftainship, and a chief's reputation and popularity were often determined by the nature of the rainmaking during his period of rule. Some of the rites he performed himself, others were carried out at his request or under his supervision by professional rainmakers (*boroka ba pula*) and other members of the tribe (Schapera 1976:60).

This patriarchal association, in terms of rainmaking rites, is further described by Willoughby (1923:204-5) as follows:

The men assembled by regiments and marched forth from the town to the trysting place, where the children of the chieftainship each made a formal speech in order of seniority, addressing the paramount in some such words as these: "We seek rain from you, chief. Where do you want us to look, that thus you do not give us rain, Son-of-Kgari (or whatever distinguished ancestor was invoked for the occasion) ... and the speaker glided forthwith into the praise-song of the ancestor mentioned." Whereupon the most important men in the Assembly chanted the refrain: "Give us rain, Son of Kgari." The paramount chief was expected to reply: I hear you; and the rain will fall.

The king's function in presiding over this ritual is immensely important. Although there are women older than the king, even those of royal ancestry, the king as patriarch is considered the most senior and therefore the right candidate for the practice. Life, growth, productivity, strength, and accomplishment in general are solely dependent on him. He is the one to approach the *badimo* in

the event of ritual ceremonies such as rainmaking. It is, however, important to note that among the Kalanga, rainmaking ceremonies, which are also closely connected with the *Ngwali* cult, are dominated by women priests called the *hosanna*. These *hosanna* dominate the entire dance and they are selected to accompany the chief priest or representative of *Ngwali* to the shrine. Having discovered that in all political, religious, economic and social matters men are the dominating figures, what then is the traditional Tswana belief about the position of women in the world of the *badimo*?

Eschatology

The position of women in Tswana traditions and culture continues to be the same even beyond the grave. This is evident in practices of burial and death.

Death and burial practices

That there is life after death is not a matter of argument for Batswana traditional religion. The Batswana believe in the continued leadership of their patriarchs in the form of ancestral spirits (*badimo*). For instance, Willoughby (1928:2) writes:

Neither of them, when they bury their dead, hesitates for a moment to express the hope of seeing them again; and “when souls are passing over”, those who remain send greetings to those who have gone before.

Willoughby (1928:80) further observed that: “The power of the ancestors has not been lessened by death ...” which is seen as birth into another life. In this way people’s gender and status is not changed by death. The royal ancestors, for instance, continue to keep a watchful eye on the ancient laws and customs of their people beyond the grave. It was for this reason that John MacKenzie (1871:397) says that Sekgoma cried out saying:

“How should I answer to Khari (sic) if I changed the customs of the town?” said Sekhome (sic) to me on one occasion when we were conversing on this subject.

Kgari, who was a long dead king of the Bangwato and father of Sekgoma, was believed to continue to guard the laws and customs of the people. By inference, therefore, the role of men and women could never be changed. Kings remained Kings, patriarchs continued to be patriarchs and household leaders retained their old standing in the family. Husbands, sons and boys, still occupied their

superior male positions, while women, daughters and girls continued to occupy their subordinate and inferior positions (Willoughby 1928:1-89).

The Batswana traditional religion, therefore, holds the belief that upon death, individuals simply move to another level of life. They continue to be part of the community which hitherto had been everything to them. They continue to play a vital role in the affairs of the living. Death does not rob them of their role as men and women. This is why among the Batlokwa women were often buried in the house, as a symbol of womanhood. As a symbol of their attachment to household work, they were buried with their utensils: hoes, bow, arrows, etc. This means that even in the spirit world, women continue to carry out domestic activities. By the same reasoning, old men are often buried at the cattle kraal in the belief that their spirits will continue to protect the cattle. A man was, for this reason, buried with his weapons so that he could continue his hunting activities after death (Willoughby 1928:40, 57-102, 270-366).

Another interesting belief held by Batswana was that the *badimo* of the husband do not directly help his children, while the mother's ancestral spirits occasionally demand attention from the children, it is the patrilineal obligation that is binding. For public ceremonies such as the celebration of agricultural seasons and seasonal hunting people tended to turn to the *badimo* of the ruling dynasty.²¹ Even at death, patriarchs are acknowledged as responsible for societal prosperity and security which, as we have seen, continue to strengthen men's position in society.²²

When a husband dies, his wife is to cry loudly or else she is accused of witchcraft. Women always seek to participate meaningfully participating in funerals. They are the ones who feed and console the mourning and grieved family, especially the children. Today, they dominate in leading hymns and singing (as a means of consoling the mourners).

The role of language, art and dance

Language, which is an important medium of communication, shows that gender is everywhere and everything. It is always socially construed (Dube 2003:86). The way Batswana speak to women and men is gendered and at times different. You will often hear expressions such as, "do not talk to me like you are talking to a woman". Men's thinking has also been conditioned that you often hear people say: "take it like a man" (Dube 2003:86). Through the use of language, men are taught to be strong and not to cry unless their hearts are going to break. They are socially constructed through the use of language not to express their feelings of fear and pain. They are to be fearless and brave. Women, on the other hand, are socially constructed through language to cry, to express their feelings, to be timid and fearful. Sometimes they are not supposed to think. What they think is often taken as senseless. Thus gender does not escape language. In other words, the power of language has been used to

promote bias attitudes against women. Through the use of language, girls and boys are taught to behave in certain ways. As already stated above, a man must be fearless, brave, a property owner, a public leader etc. While the English say, "ladies first" to mean that men must come behind so that they can protect the weak women, Batswana say, "Ga dinke dietelelwa ke manamagadi" to mean that women must follow as men lead (Dube 2003:86-88).

Through art and dance women are generally always portrayed as kneeling or bowing as an expression of femininity, humility and an inferior position, while men stand in a manner that expresses strength or masculinity, power and authority.

Women's experiences in the history of the church

So far, this article has argued that the experiences of women within the cultural context was characterised by marginalisation and discrimination. The religious, social, economic and political aspects of Batswana life worked against women. The nineteenth century missionaries and the early church endorsed the status quo as normal. This was because these missionaries came from a society which had itself struggled with the question of the place of women in the church. They, too, were influenced by the cultural practices and beliefs of their society.

Using the same Tswana patriarchal language, the majority of male missionaries had restricted women's roles to the home, which denied them the chance to contribute to the political and religious spheres.²³ Women only featured in history whenever they wanted to illustrate how Christianity had benefited them. Seeing gender in terms of power, the missionary historiography preserved some of the key social historical traditions, especially those which seemed to facilitate their objectives in Africa. A critical review of the missionary literature, however, shows that Tswana women were not as silent as portrayed.

While, historically, the methods of selecting the church leadership excluded women in favour of men, for the first time, the former began not only to penetrate the inner circle of Tswana church leadership, but also featured in political power struggles and revolutions. This developed to the extent that, in the 1920s, women were even initiating and influencing political and religious changes. However, female and male missionaries seemed to operate differently. In spite of this, the male missionaries and the Tswana men generally agreed as to what should be the role and position of women. However, male missionaries sometimes encouraged women to revolt against those customs, which they saw as an obstacle to the spread of Christianity.²⁴

The acceptance and introduction of Christianity among the Batswana took no account of the views and opinions of Tswana women, but was also seen in terms of Tswana tradition and heritage which, as this article has shown,

was strictly dominated by male leadership, especially the leadership of the male aristocrat. The close connection between the aims of missionary Christianity and traditional socio-political expectations had an inhibiting effect on Batswana women's lives. The introduction of Christianity and the influence of European political, social and economic life began to weaken Tswana cultural structures.²⁵

However, the activities of the missionaries' wives, single women missionaries, and Batswana women themselves did begin to transform the Batswana and the general view of women in Batswana society. Missionary women, especially the single women missionaries and Batswana women themselves, during the last decades of the 19th and early 20th century, did much to soften the anti-female views and attitudes, once they penetrated Tswana public life, particularly in the political and religious spheres. The Batswana women, inspired by missionary education, which they tried to relate to their own environment as far as possible, began to integrate their new work experience into the traditional life cycle, especially the life of the family. And, at times, European single women missionaries assertively challenged certain foreign and local oppressive measures against women, despite the similarly patronising attitudes that were exhibited by their "culturally superior" counterparts (i.e. male European missionaries).

Of course, cultural convictions of male superiority and female inferiority were supported and perpetuated by missionary notions of male dominance in Christianity.²⁶ Indeed, some traditional Tswana notions found resonance within Christianity. Also, the indigenisation of Christianity made it difficult to eliminate the disparaging view of women that had always existed in the past. Nonetheless, in spite of European "superiority" and Tswana complexities that influenced and moulded these women, it is realised that their contribution to the work of women was invaluable.

The historical contribution and response of women to Christianity was, in fact, not given much attention in missionary literature.²⁷ Whenever missionary writers used the term "natives" it predominantly referred to men.²⁸ Although the missionaries realised that women were being marginalised from Christian activities in some instances, they did not address such issues in their missionary debates. Like the missionary literature, the modern nationalist historiography²⁹ justified and largely concerned itself with the imperialistic effects of the missions, and ignored the role played by women in history. The role and influence of women preachers, converts and missionaries of the early years of Christianity in Botswana were therefore never fully documented, and nor was the unique contribution they made to the planting of the church fully appreciated. In spite of their pervasive influence in spreading Christianity, women have received very scant attention from historians. Paul Wesley

Chilcote says: "Sexism in historical writing is much like sexism in daily life. For the most part women are made invisible." He further pointed out that:

The neglect of historians to recognise the influence of women or to deal with issues related to the lives of women, in large measure, determine the function of their ideas about historical significance and social definition. The problem is twofold. First, historians have judged women by how far they have participated in, or were allowed to enter, the arena of traditional power; by how they have helped to shape the course of political and economic events. Insofar as women have lived outside this sphere of historical valuation, they have remained invisible, that is, unimportant and powerless (Chilcote 1991:2).

For women, tradition, in many ways, held nothing hopeful for them. Likewise, the future of women within the missionary and Tswana male dominated Christianity also seemed pointless until, perhaps, the early years of the twentieth century. In many ways, the ideas, images, and symbols of the early missionary or Tswana type of Christianity strengthened this male position. Missionaries were thus victims of both their own European and Tswana patriarchal notions and structures. Women were still largely seen as symbols of fertility and the source of life, whose main function was motherhood. Their rights and duties in the church were, therefore, limited. They rarely spoke, baptised or preached in church.

Summary

Batswana male-dominated culture believes that male leadership never comes to an end, but goes on, even beyond the grave. Whether it be in the religious or political sphere, the family is male dominated (Willoughby 1828:179). In family matters, the household head presides as the family priest while, in public *dingaka*, headmen and kings preside. Because of this bias against women, religious traditions and beliefs do not escape gender distinctions. Schapera (1953:40-59), for instance, points out that:

Land, livestock, huts, and other property are controlled by the household-head, who allocates them for use among his dependants. He is the legal head of the group, entitled to obedience, service and respect from his wives and children.

Tswana law, however, does not necessarily, consciously or deliberately deprive women freedom of participation in the state building process. That said, this statement is difficult to reconcile with the steadfast rule that a

woman cannot speak at the *kgotla* meetings, a rule that was a deliberate measure aimed at silencing women.

This article argues that the disadvantages faced by women emanate from cultural approaches that emphasise gender relations and that differentiate between male and female situations. The fact that people are born biologically male or female is interpreted to mean that they acquire a gender identity from social structures such as gender division of labour, access to, and control over, resources. Tswana law and custom put special emphasis on gender, such that tasks seen as "women's work" are demeaning to men, while other tasks are strictly "men only" (Moffat 1842: 67). From a sociological point of view it is culture, which entails norms, values and beliefs that ultimately shapes people's reality. Culture tends to have the authority of the law.

The article also argued that economic and social structures have made women powerless. For instance, they could not present themselves alone in public places. The system simply works in favour of men.

Another observation is that not all women face the same kind and degree of male bias; others enjoy the fruits of other kinds of bias, or share the deprivations, with men in the same class. Women who do not cooperate with men and try to stand on their own, without a husband, uncle, or brother, tended to be worse off, than when they enter into some kind of cooperation with men. Although female-headed households were uncommon in the past, the example of the *bonyatsi* system described earlier tends to prove this. Most men would view with disfavour any woman who had a well-defined perception of her own interests. The whole situation perpetuated male bias, and preserved women in a state of subordination.

Although male bias is often the result of mere prejudice as far as everyday attitudes and actions at the conscious level are concerned, it is also obvious that it is embedded in unconscious perceptions and habits. Perhaps men should look in the mirror, introspect first, and then look to the social system. For instance, women's contribution to child-upbringing and food production tend to be overlooked or seen as less important than male tasks; in fact, this work makes a real and substantial contribution to the home (Tlou & Campbell 1977:117).

In order to overcome male bias, more changes are required in both attitudes and cultural processes. Economic and social life needs structural alterations. Although the role of Christianity and education offers a more optimistic view for women, they also have their limitations.

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Endnotes

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- ¹ Co-Researcher at the Research Institute for Theology and Religion, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa.
- 2 See the discussion on polygamous marriages below.
- 3 W.C. Willoughby (Palapye) to L.M.S., October 12, 18, 1896, S.O.A.S: B53 JB.
- 4 Marriage gifts given by the man's parents as a gratitude to the woman's parents for their kindness in giving their daughter in marriage and for the many years of parental care and upbringing. See Setiloane, G.M., (1975) op cit, p.30.
- 5 In fact, if no suitable arrangement was made, the possibility of reclaiming *bogadi* at her death could not be ruled out.
- 6 *Botswana National Archives*, Serowe, 337, S.601/8: "Khama's life" by Sekgoma Khama, 28 March, 1925. At his death Kgari (1817-1826/8) had three wives – the chief wife Mma-Polao – childless,, Bojale, Kgama II's mother, Dibeelane, Sekgoma's mother. According to tradition Kgama was the apparent heir in the barrenness of the first. Sedimo (uncle) acting as regent under the levirate law raised a son called Macheng, with Bojale, who hierarchically became senior to Sekgoma I. Kgama's reign was short (1833-5) and was followed by a succession dispute between Sekgoma and Macheng's mother. Also see Schapera, I., (1970) op cit, p.134.
- 7 The Setswana word *mojaboswa* means the principal heir to his father's property.
- 8 The arrangement led to a substantial proportion of women marrying at an early age – say 16-19 years. It was culturally shameful for a woman to stay unmarried for a long time. Choosing and arranging wives for sons ensured they married from good families, which meant stable marriages.
- 9 "To marry – or not to marry: Marital strategies and sexual relations in a Tswana society", in *Ethnos*, pp.7-28, by O. Gulbrandsen.
- 9 Cohabiting with a married man who did not take up permanent joint residence with her. See Schapera, I., (1971) op cit, p.182; Gulbrandsen, O., *Ethnos*, Vol.51, No.1, p.11.
- 10 The phrase used was *sereti sa motse*, referring to the elevated position/status a man's presence brought to a home.
- 11 In 1850 Livingstone recorded that, of the 278 married Kaa men, whose population was later co-opted into the Ngwato, 121 were polygamists, of whom 94 had two wives each, 25 three wives, and two four wives. Cited in both Schapera, I., (1953) op cit, p.39 & J.J. Freeman, (1851) *A Tour in South Africa*, p.280.
- 13 Lloyd, E., (1895) op cit, p.76; Mackenzie, J., (1871) op cit, p.397; See John Mackenzie To LMS, Shoshong, 19 March, 1866 in M.D. Mackenzie (1922), op cit, pp.19, 108; Schapera, I., (1953). op cit, pp. 39-40; Mackenzie, W.D., (1922) op. cit., p.100; Livingstone, D., (1857) op cit, pp.8-10; Mackenzie, J., (1871) op. cit., pp.415-6. Macheng a son of Kgari's head wife was the legal heir, but Sekgoma being the eldest son of a subordinate wife usurped the throne, and killed the supporters of Macheng's mother, who fled with young Macheng to the Kwena capital.
- 14 The earliest census of 1946 show that only 2.3% of married men and 4.9% of the married women were described as divorced: Schapera, I., (1970) op cit, p.43. The low rate of divorce was attributed to the nature of the traditional mode of resolving dispute. The attempt to reconcile the partners, with the case revolving between the extended family, ward, and the main *kgotla* for a long time.
- 15 One of the extreme examples of the allegations of the manipulations of women involved Motswasele II, Sechele's father, who sometimes took other men's wives for himself by force and allowed his favourites to do so with impunity, and was as a result assassinated by his people at a *kgotla* assembly in 1823: see Schapera, I., (1970) op. cit., p.141 citing *Hermannsburger Missionsblatt*, (1859), p.38.
- 16 Schapera, I., (1970) op. cit., p.141-2. Although men could be divorced for sorcery, desertion or habitual ill-treatment or lack of support, they could not be penalised for polygamy, adultery and concubinage (*bonyatsi*) and for frequently visiting at her own home. This practice gave rise to bitterness, envy, jealousy etc. Sometimes the man's wife retaliated by assaulting her or setting fire to her hut.
- 17 A council of all adult men led by the king and his headmen. See Schapera, I., (1956) *A handbook of Tswana Law & Custom*, chp.3; M. Fortes & E.E. Evans - Pritchard (eds.), (1940) "The Political Organisation of the Ngwato of Bechuanaland Protectorate", in *African Political Systems*; Also see Moffat, R., (1842) op. cit., p.66.
- 18 Ashton, 1937, "Notes on the Political and Judicial Organization of the Tswana", in *Bantu Studies*, 11, pp.7-83; Mackenzie, J., (1871) op. cit., pp.365-9.
- 19 Willoughby, W.C., Folder 798, in Chirenji J.M., (1977) op. cit., p.33. John Philip also testified to the power of the kings: *Researches in South Africa*, 2 vols., p.131.

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- 20 Schapera, I., (1970) op. cit., pp.3,4; Moffat R., to LMS, (Molopo River), Journal of Tour to North, May & June, 1854, SOAS: SA, B29 F1 JA.
- 21 Ibid, pages 179-180; Willoughby, W.C., (1905) "Notes on Totemism of the Becwana" *Journal of Royal Anthropological Institute*, 35, pp.295-314; Also Willoughby, W.C., (1928) op cit, pp.226-254; Mackenzie, J., (1871) op. cit., pp.383f.
- 22 Willoughby, W.C., "Notes on the totemism of the Becwana", *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institution*, 35, pp.302-11; Willoughby, W.C., (1928) op. cit., pp.226-34, 251-4, 291; Mackenzie, J., (1871) op. cit., p.383f; Schapera, I., (1953) op cit, pp.59-60.
- 22 See "The Contribution of Missionary Wives in the Planting of the Church in Botswana in the Late Nineteenth and Twentieth centuries", *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae (SHE)*, 34: Supplement: (2008), 333-358.
- 23 Ibid, 5(1) Serowe, 1913, A. Jennings, 1914.
- 24 *Reports of the L.M.S*, 4(1) Shoshong for 1907, E. Lloyd, 1908.
- 25 Mackenzie, J., (1871) Ch. 18: A Chapter of Bamangwato History. It traces the Ngwato tradition which simply preserves the names of prominent kings and their ideas. There is no single mention of the role of women.
- 26 J.D. Hepburn, 1895; J. Mackenzie, 1871; Robert Moffat, 1842; David Livingstone, 1857 etc; Lloyd, 1895; Richard Lovett, 1895; du Plessis, J. 1911; Goodall, N., 1945; Burns, J.H.L., 1962; Campbell, J., 1815 etc.
- 27 John Mackenzie,(1871) p. 348 says "soon after my arrival (at Shoshong) ... I availed myself of the custom of the natives, and asked the chief to point out where I might build, which he was very willing to do." The allocation of land and its legislation was a sole responsibility of men. In p. 369 when referring to hunters and cattle herdsman he uses the word "natives" over and over again.
- 28 Chirenji, J.H., 1977, 1978; Dachs, A.J., 1971, 1974; Parsons, Q.N., 1972; Tlou T., 1985; Benson, M., 1960 etc.