

Constructions of traditional womanhood in Botswana myths and popular culture

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Abstract

Mythic-historical narratives, oral legends, popular culture, and traditional marriage rituals offer African traditional forms of performance that shed light on the nature of sexual politics in Africa as well as practices of black female expression and popular resistance. These performance forms contribute to the circulation of negative constructions of black African women. This article sets up a genealogy of the image that begins with oral narratives and continues through portrayals of actual women. It examines misogynistic and stereotypical depictions of women in the Botswana collective cultural imaginary and in transnational forms of representation.

Keywords: Botswana popular culture, feminine identities, exoticized sexuality.

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Introduction: Myth and the construction of feminine identities

Popular culture forms, folkloric elements, and other traditional narrative formations operate as cultural memory to inform the perception of actual women in Botswana and other parts of Africa. These cultural forms of performance offer a social commentary on the nature of African sexual politics, gender polarities, and patriarchal ideologies. They dramatize stereotypical portraits that help justify women's subjugation. Prevalent in Botswana popular culture are the female iconic figures of warrior, witch, and whore, all of which are used stereotypically to construct perceived female deviance and malice. This article suggests that the female archetypal figure in these performance traditions and popular cultural processes elaborate feminist resistance and assertiveness against colonial and patriarchal prejudices.

Three popular narratives and myths about women from Botswana are the narrative of Queen Mantatisi "the warrior queen", the myth of the "Night Seducer", and the legend of the Ghost of Mmamashia. This article examines these mythological formulations to highlight their use in constructing traditionalized African womanhood, particularly in Botswana cultural and popular consciousness. The myths partake in the historical and cultural construction of gender norms and feminine identities in Botswana, and in particular, corroborate notions of "appropriate" femininity. The gendered perceptions of women are also prevalent in wedding songs and other cultural processes that underscore "appropriate" behaviour for women.

Methodology

This article adopts qualitative processes of inquiry and data collection. It privileges the interpretative perspective by focusing on the function, significance, and ideological meanings embedded in the songs, myths, and images of women in Botswana expressive forms. The article uses the approach of narrative inquiry to investigate these expressive formations. Narrative Inquiry is a method of investigating stories, narratives, and lived experience and their relationship to the social context (Etherington 2007, Clandinin and Connelley 2000). "Stories," according to Etherington (2007: 600), "can be viewed as socially situated knowledge constructions in their own right that value the messiness, differences, depth and texture of experienced life." Narratives thus reflect on social phenomena and actual experience.

The data collection process involved semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions, participant-observation, taking photographs

at curio shops, and purposeful, theory-based sampling of cartoons of African political female figures in print and electronic media. Sampled cartoons corroborate the theoretical construct of gendered representations of female political leaders and enhance their meaning in the African context (Creswell 2007). Other approaches used are transcriptions and translations of traditional Botswana wedding songs, and indigenous songs about women, from Setswana to English. The data on wedding songs and marriage rites were gathered at wedding ceremonies in the villages of Tlokweng, Mochudi, and Dikwididi. The findings were supplemented by the researcher's observations and discussions with elderly informers from the three research sites. Field notes and interpretations and explanations of songs by informants were taken and transcribed. Songs by and about women and female performers were also purposefully sampled from the Radio Botswana programme *Dipina le Maboko*, which broadcasts indigenous Botswana music and poetry. A close critical reading of song lyrics, mythic narratives, and marriage rituals was deployed using the analytic approaches of theatre and performance studies. Specifically, the article uses notions of "performance" (Schechner 2002, Roach 1996) and "performativity" (Butler 1990) to examine the role of performance in constructions of womanhood in Botswana. Gender roles, in accordance with these theorists, are re-enactments of repeated, rehearsed scripts of femininities and masculinities, and such roles are similar to rehearsed theatrical performances.

The researcher also conducted interviews at Mowana Lodge, a tourist site that displays material culture in Kasane, Northern Botswana. A seminar presentation of the pilot research findings was presented during the English Department seminar series at the University of Botswana. The presentation facilitated more data collection and sharpened the critical tools of analysis to substantiate the theorizing of the portrayal of women in the Botswana collective cultural imaginary.

The wicked African warrior Queen

The historical narrative of Queen Mantatisi informs the broad social perception of real African women, as will be illustrated in the figure of Winnie Mandela. The story of Queen Mantatisi evolved from the actual historical figure of the regent of the Batlokwa people who ruled during the Lifaqane pre-colonial wars of Southern Africa in the 19th Century. The Lifaqane wars staged militaristic empire expansions led by rulers such as Shaka of the Zulu and other kings such as

Mzilikazi and Moshoeshoe. Hordes of conquering armies led by these rulers invaded and annihilated their neighbours and confiscated their possessions. Queen Mantatisi led the Batlokwa, the so-called “Wild Cat People” during these battles, and as Peter Becker (1968) observes, she was memorialized not only as “the most fascinating female African conqueror of all time”, but also as a “ruthless conqueror, utterly callous to human suffering.” She was the daughter of King Mothaba of the Basia, and she married Makotja, king of the Batlokwa. Queen Mantatisi took regency for her minor son Sikonyela, following the death of her husband. Despite opposition from the royal house of the group that she led, including civil war and threats to kill her, she remained astute and steadfast, ruling as a regent until her son was successfully enthroned. Her military conquest stretched across pre-colonial South Africa into modern-day Botswana. Queen Mantatisi’s political power and military prowess were recorded in numerous folk traditions and archives. Tales of her simultaneously destructive and nurturing powers proliferated in both Botswana and South Africa, following her expansionist war expeditions. Her exploits earned her the label of “honorary man” (Eldredge 1993).

The narrative of Mantatisi partakes in the collective historical and cultural memory that constructed sovereignty as a masculine space. In pre-colonial Africa, including Botswana, the notion of sovereignty was culturally constituted to reflect good governance and leadership prowess as inherently male attributes. This belief informed the perception of female leaders such as Queen Mantatisi as cultural curios. The popular narrative, however, is significant in circulating a memory of women such as her, who challenged the prejudices against female leaders in pre-colonial Africa. As a military leader with political power, Mantatisi sought not only to establish her own kingdom and to secure the enthronement of her son, but to also subvert the tradition of ascribing women the stereotypical role of royal wives, whose lives were circumscribed by domesticity. The narrative draws attention to the existence of royal women who exercised female agency domestically, intellectually, and politically.

The popular descriptions of Mantatisi’s legendary war expeditions functioned to construct her as a bloodthirsty war monster who relished bloodshed. This form of characterization was possibly motivated by misogyny. The act of dehumanizing her recalls stereotypes of female malice. Even more pointedly, and in accordance with the Setswana

proverb that *Ga di ke di etelelwa ke manamagadi pele* (a head is never led by a female), a proverb that animates the principle that men rule and women obey, Mantatisi's exercising of her political and historical agency to build a strong community was contained in the ideas of monstrosity. The narrative construction of Mantatisi works in collusion with the gendered perception of traditional women in Botswana popular consciousness as being incapable of leadership, as reflected in the proverb.

Mantatisi's virility was further captured in grotesque visual representations in oral narratives. She is rumored to have been a gigantic woman with huge breasts. It is said that before her warriors went off to battle, she would suckle them to give them power against their enemies. Her breast milk, perpetually in abundant supply, was believed to have been useful not only in healing the wounds of her warriors, but also as poison against her rivals. Peter Becker (1968) writes about a tall, grotesque "mighty woman" who headed an "invincible army, numerous as locusts, marching onward among interior nations, carrying devastation and ruin wherever she went; that she nourished the army with her own milk, sent hornets before it, and ... was laying the world desolate." Although the myth of Queen Mantatisi largely masculinized her, it simultaneously transfigures her body as a site of intervention. The narrativization of breast-feeding hordes of warriors appropriates a discourse of female corporeality to generate value to a female body. This is a cultural process that creatively asserts female power and agency by subverting the role of corporeality (Gilbert and Tompkins 1996) that has been assigned to the African woman.

Mantatisi's transfiguration through the discourse of female body politics deconstructs the "masks of patriarchal production", as feminist theorist and performance critic Sue-Ellen Case (1985) would have it. Case elaborates the concept of "Woman", the fictional gender created through patriarchal culture. 'This 'Woman', Case argues, "appeared on the stage, in myths, and in the plastic arts, representing the patriarchal values attached to the gender of 'Woman' while suppressing the experiences, stories, feelings, and fantasies of actual women" (p.318). The actual woman, Mantatisi, disrupts the patriarchal construction of the idealized "Woman" within the cultural and/or folkloristic landscape of Botswana. Through acts of gender reversal, Mantatisi appropriates the popular constructs of African "warrior" to creatively redefine female power and agency.

The performance of cultural memory through myths like that of Queen Mantatisi informs the perception of actual women in contemporary African societies. A good illustration is the depiction of Winnie Mandela in South African popular culture. The representation of Winnie in these cultural forms elaborates perceptions of wicked African/and or Black women through portraits of the female warrior, sorcerer, and deceiver. In the years of apartheid, Winnie Mandela headed the African National Congress Women's League, and was revered by her supporters as "Mother of the Nation". When constructed as "Mother of the Nation", Winnie embodies the political nurturer who saw all black South Africans as a collectivity. Following the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's investigations, she was convicted of abduction and assault in connection with the death of a 14-year-old boy known as Stompie Seipei. She was also convicted on charges of fraud and theft. These charges tarnished her image so much that she was dubbed "Mugger of the Nation" by her rivals (Hawthorne 1997). Winnie's depiction recalls aspects of the unfeminine, domineering matriarch and destructive warrior that Mantatisi engendered. This perception is particularly instructive as it depicts an embodiment of contrasting virtues of reproduction and violence; fear and desire. The multiple positioning of Winnie fractures unitary sightlines of viewing her, as Gilbert and Tompkins (1996: 250) would have it, and highlights ways of re-visioning and articulating female power.

Winnie's image in contemporary forms of popular culture builds upon the image of Mantatisi—the surrogate military commander who sowed seeds of destruction. This type of imaging is evident in the creation of South African cartoonist illustrator, Jonathan Shapiro, popularly known as Zapiro. The cartoonist builds on the collective political memory of Winnie and South African politics conjoined with the memory of Shakespearean dramatic representations of women.

Figure 1: Winnie Mandela as Lady Macdela



Cartoon © Zapiro. Reproduced in Pieter-Dirk Uys (2002).

Zapiro’s “Lady Macdela” is haunted by her political mishaps, and recalls the case of 14-year-old Stompie. Set against a backdrop of royalty and conspiracy, the staging of Winnie takes shape in “Lady Macdela’s Soliloquy.” Winnie’s imagined embodiment of the ruthlessness and guilt that recalls Lady Macbeth is reflected in her cry, “Out, damned spot! Out, I say!” Her royal accoutrements are in sharp contrast to the vanquished Stompie specter. Two things inform this perception of Winnie and become congruent—a Shakespearean play that is famous for its negative depiction of women in power, from witches to an evil queen, and the African historical narrative of Mantasi. In this context, the colonial and indigenous past intertwine. This performance of memory and history of gendered representation demonstrates how indigenous acts of knowledge transfer and collective memory are conjoined with colonial forms of archiving.

The other particularly informative negative depiction of African womanhood can be seen through an infamous cartoon by Billy Chiepe about a Botswana female politician, Kathleen Letshabo.

Figure 2: Cartoonistic impression of Kathleen Letshabo. *Mmegi Monitor* (28 May, 2007)



This cartoon followed the Botswana National Front political party congress during which Letshabo lost in the contest for the position of party president against a male politician, Otsweletse Moupo. The cartoon depicts Letshabo as a badly bruised and bleeding bull being castrated, while another bull looks on from inside the cattle enclosure, presumably casting the triumphant Moupo. Heavily charged with misogynistic ideas and stereotypes, this cartoon outraged feminists and

women's rights organizations in Botswana and in the region, including *Gender Links* and *Gender and Media Southern Africa*. This cartoon is a visual articulation of the patriarchal ideology echoed in the proverb cited earlier, and corroborates the belief that women cannot be effective leaders. This conservative ideology is enhanced through another proverb which states that *poo ga di ke di tlhakanela lesaka* [two bulls never share a cattle enclosure]. Newspaper columnist Dan Moabi (2007) is correct in reading the cartoon's use of the bullfighting metaphor to mean that Moupo is the "virtuous" bull and Letshabo as the "villainous" antagonistic one that deserves punishment. The cartoonist borrows from these proverbial principles as well as mythic-historic narratives such as the Mantatisi legend to throw caution at "uncharacteristic" females who traverse the boundaries of gendered roles and culturally masculinized spaces. It "narrativises" how women have been marginalized by the encounter between patriarchal social practices and feminist acts of post-colonial female subjectivity.

The political scenarios embodied by the female figures of Winnie Mandela, Kathleen Letshabo and Mmantatisi are good accounts of African women's agency, and their creative and political power. These examples underscore the political accomplishments of real African women in the country and across the continent, as evidenced by their positions as queens, regents, and politicians who offer creative and alternative ways of performing female identities (Salami 2003; Boris 2007; Nnaemeka 1997). These female figures elaborate the body as a site of resistance, to echo feminist theorist Elizabeth Grosz (1990). They speak through their bodies, as Michel Foucault (1981) would have it, expressing the histories of gendered representations and articulating the memories and power relations inscribed on their bodies as female subjects. Even more pointedly, these female figures give insight into the notion of gender as being performative, in the sense of feminist philosopher Judith Butler (1990), showing how contemporary female figures *perform* assertive womanhood.

Bodiless seductive women

If the perception of Winnie Mandela illustrates how practices of embodiment derive from historical narratives, disembodiment symbolizes the mysterious, spiritual world. Two myths about women in Botswana illustrate these popular constructions—the myth of the Gaborone "night seducer" and the myth evoking the ghost of Mmamashia.

The myth regarding the sexually suspect Gaborone night woman narrates the adventures of a female youth who was raped and killed by her lover. This mysterious woman, albeit as a disembodied figure, is now rumoured to stalk men, around the city of Gaborone, who fall prey to her charm. Typically, this exceptionally beautiful woman seductively invites the man to her apartment; the two enjoy each other's company for the night, and the man wakes up to find himself sleeping on top of a grave, presumably belonging to the murdered girl, at the city cemetery!

This story emphasizes the perception of women's sexual indiscretions in the Botswana popular cultural imaginary. The Night Seducer is the vanquished figure who haunts contemporary narratives of male-female relationships in the country. Corroborated by patriarchal constructions of ideal femininity, the Seducer is conjured as the immoral female figure that deserves to be justifiably subjugated through rape. The stereotype of the Night Seducer evokes the need to police her body and to characterize her as the deviant "Other" for trafficking in her body. Her characterization also evokes her wickedness, and reveals a fear of the mysterious spiritual world. The Gaborone Seducer's constructed seductiveness echoes qualities that are naturalized for women in traditional Botswana society. Sexual fidelity is sanctioned for women, but not for men, as reflected in proverbs used to initiate young brides into wifehood. A good illustration is the proverb *Monna ga a botswe 'O tswa kae'* [Never ask about the man's whereabouts]. Such practices point towards a legacy of actual women whose sexual pleasure is constricted by expectations to fulfill exclusively their husbands' sexual pleasure and fantasies.

The conjuring of the seductive woman in the narrative echoes other myths of gender reversal where the female presumably conquers the male through emasculation. The Seducer myth animates constructions of the castrating female who embodies the stereotype of black female promiscuity, mystique, and sorcery. Her depiction resonates with the stereotypical imaging of women, in Botswana popular culture, who are depicted as emasculating men through evil magic and medicinal portions, as in their power to create *dikukuru* and *bopharameseseng* [wimps and eunuchs]. These men are perceived as sexually disempowered male victims of women who practice sorcery out of spite and malice.

The myth of the Ghost of Mmamashia is as follows: A long time ago, a mysterious woman died in a car accident at the crossroads of Gaborone and Mmamashia. Now, every day between 12 midnight and 3 am, anyone who drives past this site is bound to see this pretty lady

standing right in the middle of the road. As soon as the driver sways the car to avoid hitting her, the car overturns. Stories about people's encounters with the Ghost of Mmamashia proliferate to this day in Botswana, despite spiritual healers' attempts to exorcise her spirit. With seeming impunity, the Ghost of Mmamashia constantly returns to this site to claim more unsuspecting victims.

Inscribed with equivocations of vengeance and mysticism, the myth of the Ghost of Mmamashia constructs the female figure as incarcerated. The Ghost represents the morbid female body that terrorizes society through violent, mysterious powers. It is mythologized as a cannibalized figure that returns to the site of her vanished body to "consume" other bodies. In the narrative, she is cast as the demonic vanished, disembodied female body that remains caught in the cycle of morbid female subjectivity. Particularly, the story resonates with "a condemnation of female wickedness" (Cole 2007: 273). Yet, conjuring the ghost figure as erased actually underscores the power that comes from repressed visibility. By being re-presented through mythologized conceptualizations, the Ghost of Mmamashia inscribes her subversive power and the possibility to draw on folkloric acts of cultural recall in order to reinforce African female agency.

The three narratives discussed above offer a critique of the complexity, the erasure, and contradictory significations of women in an African society. They serve to signify mythologized performance traditions as a site for the reinvention of womanhood in contemporary Botswana. The stories echo a history of gendered representations, poignantly reflected through the continued negative constructions of female "Otherness". Tropes of conquest, repression, and female dissidence permeate these narratives. Yet their continued circulation, perhaps inadvertently, suggests a site for possibilities of female identity re-articulation. Echoing a history of the female body as racialized and gendered, the narratives imbricate actual post-colonial African female political figures that perform female assertiveness.

Marriage rituals

Wedding songs and marriage rituals provide a glimpse into the way gender identities in Botswana are historicized and transmitted. These performance practices partake in constructions of femininities and masculinities. The wedding ceremony is a highly theatrical scenario and a live repertoire of knowledge transfer (Taylor 2003). The figure of the uncle, particularly, is essential as a director of the marriage

transaction, especially in the battering process of presenting the bride-wealth. The wedding ceremony also encapsulates rehearsed, repeatable, and transferable forms such as costume, song, and dance. This festivity is further legitimated as a performance by virtue of it being performed before an audience of spectators, witnesses, and participants.

During the ceremony, the homes of the parents as well as those of key social actors such as the uncle are transformed into a physical space of initiation, a codified performance space that evokes transition into a different social identification. The songs are generally sung by young people, men and women, who attend the wedding ceremony, and are accompanied by horn-blows, ululations, and choreographic designs. The singers move around the yard in a dance circle, gesturing and stomping their feet. The rest of the audience watches as the dialogue between the singers, the bride, and the spectators continues. Most songs are sung directly to the bride, while others are meant for everyone attending the ceremony. There are songs inviting on-lookers to “admire the bride who looks like a star”, and songs challenging the bride “not to weep because she has accepted his proposal”, and those that advise her to “be resilient because we have collected the bride wealth.” Further examples of these “advice” songs are as follows:

Song 1: Sweep, sweep, girl!

<i>Feela, feela, feela ngwanyana!</i>	Sweep, sweep, sweep, girl!
<i>Feela ngwanyana,</i>	Sweep girl;
<i>O se jele matlakaleng!</i>	Don't eat in a messy home!

<i>Matsale ke chobolo,</i>	Your mother-in-law is a shrew!
<i>Chobolo ya mosadi</i>	The epitome of a shrew!
<i>Feela ngwanyana</i>	Sweep girl;
<i>O se jele matlakaleng!</i>	Don't eat in a messy home!

Song 2: Make way for her

<i>Heela matsale,</i>	Hey mother-in-law
<i>Tlogela dipitsa tseo</i>	Leave your cooking pots
<i>Mongatsona ke yo o etla!</i>	The real owner has just arrived!
<i>Mosuteleng, mosuteleng,</i>	Make way; make way,
<i>Keyo o etla!</i>	Here she comes!

Song 3: Rebellious cattle

<i>Dikgomo tsa bogadi,</i>	Some bride wealth cattle
<i>Dingwe di mabelete,</i>	Are whores;
<i>Di tlola ka terata,</i>	They escape through the fence

Sebonta o ile Gauteng!

Like Sebonta who ran away to Gauteng!

The songs cited above are directed at the newly-wedded bride, and function as embodied acts of transfer (Taylor 2003) of indigenous knowledge about gender norms, appropriate feminine behaviour and acceptable wifehood. The songs are about labour and hardships; not pleasure. In song 1 above, for example, the bride is advised to “keep her home clean”; an expression that imbricates the expectations to behave modestly, to be submissive and honour her husband and in-laws, and to bear children. The song throws in a cautionary note of marriage hardships (Ellece 2007; 2011), but suppresses this codified message through reiterating the girl’s role to “keep everything clean” in the public eye. The message to stay resolute and not to “shame us” by getting a divorce is reiterated. Song 2 performs the sequestering of ideal womanhood to the private sphere of the home, echoing the idea of domesticity (ibid 2007). In song 3, the persona appeals to the bride to stay faithful to her husband and to shun immorality. This song is significant in its comparison of the hyper-sexualized cow to a promiscuous woman. It is worth noting that traditionally, chastity was naturalized for women and that marital infidelity was not overtly censurable for men. As part of a wedding ritual called *go laiwa* (*go laya*), a scene during which the bride receives advice from other married women, she is advised not to challenge male promiscuity. This is implicated in proverbs such as *Monna ga a botswe 'o tswakae* [Never ask about the man’s whereabouts]; *Monna phafana o a fapaanelwa*, [A man is a beer vessel, he is meant to be shared]. Thus, the man’s acts of sexual immorality are normalized as inevitable, and the woman’s cooperation as requisite for a successful marriage. Through these imaginings, pleasure for the bride is deferred, and the absence of the husband is normalized. As feminist scholar Sibonile Ellece (2007, 2010: 70) observes, gendered language and values (such as the dissipation of pleasure and romance in marriage) are nurtured and perpetuated within the institution of marriage.

Even more pointedly, the songs are not about the bride and the groom, but specifically about two women, the bride and the mother-in-law. Most emphasize the separation rather than the connection between the two women. The mother-in-law is constructed as a bully who expects the bride to become a surrogate servant. To borrow from feminist and performance critics Pryse and Spillers (1985) and their articulation of the notion of conjuring, the mother-in-law’s “ancient power” to share the “magic” of storytelling and to strengthen “the network of female connectedness” is replaced by the narrative of severance. Any possible

imagination of her as the bride's mentor and female friend is erased through the logic of separation. The possibility to conjure up the connections between the two women is inhibited and constricted. Here, conjuring is echoed not to "reassert the self" but to isolate. The "ancient magic" and power of agency that defines conjuring is constructed as a threat to patriarchal power. Arguably, as part of Botswana popular culture and embodied knowledge, wedding songs and marriage rituals translate attitudes of homophobia.

Songs of subversion and female self-assertion

A few indigenous songs exist in Botswana popular performance to demonstrate acts of female assertiveness and creative agency. Most of these are sung and performed by women to mixed audiences. These songs destabilize the monolithic imaging of the demure, docile traditional Botswana woman.

Song 4: Secret lover

<i>Nna le Rammata</i>	Me and my Lover
<i>Nna le Rammata, mmata!</i>	Me and my sweet Lover!
<i>Re kgonwa ke mogopo,</i>	We feel contented
<i>Re kgonwa ke mogopo o tletse!</i>	We feel contented, only after a bowlful [of sex]!

In Botswana cultural consciousness, sex and public displays of sexual affection are taboo subjects. Particularly, sexual gratification is constructed as a luxury reserved for men. This song is thus particularly instructive in that the female persona publicly declares her active participation and pleasure derived from sexual intercourse. The performing body in this narrative thus asserts female creative agency.

Another example of female power and social critique is as follows:

Song 5: Tribute to uncle

<i>Swii, swiiswii!</i>	(chorus)
<i>Malalaswii!</i>	
<i>Ke tsamaile le malome</i>	I went on a journey with my uncle
<i>Kopele ra itapolosa</i>	After a while, we stopped to rest
<i>A re, "setlogolo ntsha ditlhogo"</i>	He said, "Niece, pay your tribute"
<i>Ka re, "ditlhogo ke eng malome?"</i>	I said, "What's tribute, uncle?"
<i>A re, "ditlhogo ke sengwe le sengwe"</i>	He said, "A tribute is anything you have."

“Serope le sone dithhogo!”

“A ‘thigh tribute’ is just as good!”

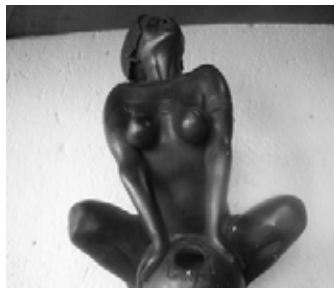
Malalaswii!

This song dramatizes a scene in which an uncle demands sexual favours from his niece. Its pornographic display is evident through the demand for the niece’s “thighs”, euphemistically referring to the female genitalia. As feminist critic Leloba Molema (2003) correctly observes, the niece resists the uncle’s advances. The niece’s response in this performance, however, does not just signal “socially defined censure” against incest, but rather a transformative feminist strategy. The defiant voicing of cultural censure combines with the visualizing of disapproval on the part of the niece to be publicly displayed as a commodity fetish of Tswana kinship ties. These songs of subversion demonstrate not only the “diversity of ways in which relations of power are constructed” (Mouffe 1992: 382) but also how such relations have been re-visioned and re-articulated.

Marketing exotic sexuality

Mowana Lodge in Kasane, northern Botswana, is one of the most popular tourist sites that carry many cultural materials, some of which inspired my research on constructions of femininities in Botswana. One art piece depicted a naked black woman in a squatting posture, holding an earthenware water pitcher [*nkgo*] between her legs. Carved in exquisite marble, the structure was particularly striking in its technologizing and narrativizing of gender and sexual “excessiveness”. With deliberate geometric precision, the artist had designed and carved out the opening of the water vessel in such a way that it connected directly to the vagina. There is a clear connection and uninterrupted continuation between the two orifices; signaling a visualization of the history and construction of gender and sexuality in the Botswana cultural imaginary.

Figure 3: “Lady and water pitcher”.



Photography by author.

Next to this art piece was a similar one, clearly carved by the same artist, with the woman in the same squatting posture, holding a drum.

Figure 4: “Lady and drum.”



Photography by author

The two carvings were elevated on a mantelpiece in a restaurant, and were visible to guests as they dished out their food. Struck by these images, I interviewed a few guests for their reactions to them. Most females, locals and visitors to the country, displayed a discomfort with what they labelled as “pornographic overtones” of the artefacts. Others simply viewed them as innocent artistic expressions.

These artworks are a precise physical depiction of the construction of female identity in traditional Botswana. Utilizing the calabash and the drum as objects of cultural heritage, the carvings described and pictured above resonate with connotations of the hyper-sexualized black female body. The artefacts reproduce the vagina as a fetish and the preponderance of the vagina as a distinguishing female sexual organ also functions as a motif for pleasure and danger. In Setswana cultural discourses, the vagina is metaphorically referred to as *kuku* a “cake”, *tlhako* a “cow hoof” (in reference to the slit or split in the hoof), *nkgo* a “calabash”, *dikobo* or *malala* “blankets”, or *motswedi* a “spring”. Similar to a delicious cake, the woman gets “consumed”; like a cooling water calabash, she brings replenishment. As one informant offered, like a spring, the woman’s vagina can overflow or overwhelm with an excess amount of joy or danger. Most significantly, an overflowing spring can be fatally destructive. The vagina can be destructive when it is “contaminated” with disease, as in the case of HIV AIDS. Generally, in Botswana popular cultural consciousness, women are depicted as the

source of sexually transmitted diseases. An advertisement on Botswana Television, for example, animates the ways in which “beautiful city girls” transmit AIDS to unsuspecting men. The advertisement deploys notions of beauty and charm stereotypically to signify female sexual immorality. The performance of cultural memory in this advertisement is interesting because male promiscuity is not frowned upon, even in marriage.

The placing of the female figure in the space of the tourist hotel is particularly informative. The figure bears the mark of the over-exoticized “Africa” of the colonial imaginary. She embodies the indigenous or “primitive” within the modern space of the hotel. As part of Botswana narrative of cultural heritage tourism, the urban space of the hotel negotiates the colonial legacies of “African” exotic landscapes. The female naked body thus signifies the accessibility and penetrability of that “Africa”, and echoes ideas of exoticized black female sexuality. Conceptualizations of exotic African sexuality date back to the exhibitions of Saartjie Baartman, the so called Hottentot Venus. In Nineteenth Century Europe, Baartman’s exhibitionists emphasized her exotic sexuality in the minds of Europeans. Contemporary artworks such as those depicted above resonate with equivocations of the re-penetrability of the post-colonial space.

Another characteristic display of women’s bodies appears in popular singer and traditional male dancer, George Swabi’s famous song “Baga Mmangwato”. The song stages the drama concerning an old man who laments his wife’s “blankets” (vagina) which have become dry and stale. In his characteristic vaudevillian, slapstick performance, George Swabi declares, in Song 5:

Song 5: Madam-big-butt

<i>Mma-sephankga sutella koo</i>	Madam-big-butt, scoot over
<i>O adile phate wa ala sekoko!</i>	You’ve spread out your dry blanket!

To borrow from Henry Louis Gates (1988), signifyin(g) on the woman’s old and “dry” vagina, Swabi stages the idea that women become non-profitable as they age. In the lyrics above, Swabi also evokes the association of women with animals through the image of the *phate*, a traditional blanket made from a cow hide. Like an uncomfortable cow-hide bedspread, the older woman’s genitalia are unpleasant and unappealing to the man. George Swabi’s song thus weaves together an intricate display of female sexual parts. The song is often performed through a pantomime. The Signifyin(g) devices of narrating and performing female sexuality and the humour invoked during the dance

mystify the underlying misogyny behind Swabi's performance. Swabi's drama also repeats the image of the voluptuous African woman, and resonates with figurations of exoticized sexuality just like in the figure of Baartman. Through a pantomime of the voluptuous woman, George Swabi portrays the surrealist construction of gender and sexuality in the Botswana cultural imaginary.

The motif of exoticized (and eroticised) sexuality and its display also figure through transnational floating objects such as postcards, postage stamps, and t-shirts. As the examples of t-shirts below demonstrate, the trafficking of African female sexuality is appropriated to the market and transposed across national and transnational borders. "Africa makes me so hot!" reads one t-shirt. The imprint is accompanied by a drawing of a sexualized zebra (red lips). This t-shirt recalls constructs of African female sexuality through a humorous and sexualizing play on images of the "wilderness" and atmospheric temperature. Animal depictions evoke stereotypical representations of African female sexual exoticism, lasciviousness, and savagery. These imaginations provide justification for female conquest and domestication by the imperialist male.

Figure 5: T-shirt inscription "Africa Makes me so Hot!"



Picture of a t-shirt displayed in a curio shop at Mowana Lodge, Kasane. Photography by author.

This motif of savage sexuality recurs in two other examples. One t-shirt is inscribed "Girls in Africa are so darned cute!" and features a "sexually attractive" giraffe. The other reads, "African queen" and dramatizes a leopard embellished with a golden tiara.

Figure 6: T-shirt inscription, "Girls in Africa are so Darned Cute!"



Picture of a t-shirt displayed in a curio shop at Mowana Lodge, Kasane. Photography by author.

Figure 7: T-shirt inscription, “African Queen.”



Picture of a t-shirt displayed in a curio shop at Mowana Lodge, Kasane. Photography by author

In depicting Africa and African female sexuality, the animal surrogates the woman as a sign of value and identification. Yet in this surrogation the female body does not disappear; instead it is performatively suspended through notions of cultural heritage tourism. This substitution confirms the female body's capacity to be re-appropriated for profit as a cultural and tourist object. As much as African "wilderness" is for sale through tourist enterprises, African female sexuality is perpetually exhibited on the transnational "auction block" as either a popular form of amusement or an object of property.

Conclusion

The myths, songs, proverbs, and other forms of cultural recall analyzed here reveal the female body as a corporeal site that is inscribed with marks of social and cultural values, norms, and practices (Grosz 1994). These forms of popular performance inform attributes of domesticity, demureness, and sexual impurity, and underscore gender as performative. The practices are central to notions of sexual domination and control. They perform the anxiety over transgressive behaviours, and subjectivities that offend Tswana patriarchal sensibilities. Most significantly, however, these practices highlight expressive performance traditions as a rich site for subversive behaviours that symbolize possible change, adaptability, and knowledge transmission. This essay offered a critique of oral traditions and notions of traditional womanhood while simultaneously theorizing these popular performance as sites for re-articulating Botswana femininities. Traditional wedding songs, marriage rituals, and indigenous songs of subversion by women performers are strategic sites used to conjure female networks, creative agency and power. Notably, the existence and successes of the assertive and

subversive female figures as politicians, businesswomen, leaders, and experts in various sectors in Botswana remains largely unarticulated in contemporary popular culture and urban cultural processes.

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