



Aunty with a Key: Aunties' power, status and authority in African traditional ceremonies



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This article offers personal reflections and scholarly observations that identify the significance of maternal and paternal aunties in *bogadi* and *ulwaluko* traditional ceremonies. *Bogadi* is a Tswana marital and thanksgiving ceremony between two families. It is a rite of passage for the newlyweds as they are inducted into marriage. *Ulwaluko* is an initiation of Xhosa boys into manhood. Through an African Feminist lens and an analytic autoethnographic methodology, the authors narrate personal experiences of their aunties roles in closed ceremonial interactions that highlighted the key role African women play in cultural rituals. Findings show that aunties are revered in African ceremonies. In both *bogadi* and *ulwaluko* ceremonies, it was evident that we revere aunties as intellectual and moral gatekeepers during these special cultural events.

Contribution: The article adds to the growing literature that seeks to write about African women positively through an empowering lens that shows their agency in cultural settings.

Keywords: aunties; Xhosa; Tswana; culture; *ulwaluko*; *bogadi*.

Introduction

This article brings Xhosa and Tswana South African experiences of aunting to the fore. The word 'aunting' has been used as a verb (Barnwell 2022; Ellingson & Sotirin 2010; Milardo 2009) to denote the often underacknowledged doing of kinship and caregiving by aunties in family units. This study locates aunties' roles as intellectual and moral gatekeepers in the practices of *ulwaluko* in Xhosa culture and *bogadi* in Tswana culture by centring their actions around African women's roles in traditional ceremonies. As a system that governs human relations and interactions, culture thrives on shared perceptions and attitudes that a group of people adopt in their way of life (Mazama 2001:388). Some traditions and practices within this system happen as daily or special occasions. This article focuses on traditional practices that occur on sacred cultural events such as *ulwaluko* (initiation into manhood) in Xhosa culture and *bogadi* (also known as bride price) in Tswana culture. Tswana and Xhosa cultures are part of the multiplicity of South Africa's indigenous cultures. The Xhosa people predominantly live in the eastern and western regions of South Africa, and Tswana people primarily reside in the northern part of South Africa. However, people from both cultures often live in other parts of the country as there are no restrictions on where people from various ethnic groups can live in South Africa.

Like many African cultures, the Xhosa and Tswana cultures use traditional practices determined by each ethnic group. However, these practices inherently have 'power dynamics and social hierarchies of a people' (Kuumba 2006:112). The norm is that men are the ones who hold more power and occupy a higher social status than women as dictated by patriarchy. As Molar Ogundipe-Leslie (1993:104) states, 'cultural specificities are man-centred, and they are geared towards the satisfaction of man's needs'. As a result, men tend to determine and facilitate cultural traditional ceremonies because societies, underpinned by patriarchal beliefs, perceive them as more capable than women. Therefore, it is common practice for men to occupy leading roles in traditional ceremonies such as *ulwaluko* in Xhosa culture and *bogadi* negotiations in Tswana customs. This assumption is embedded in 'centuries-old attitudes of patriarchy', which normalised male domination (Ogundipe-Leslie 1993:113).

Traditionally, African women often occupy minor status in family structures (Schapera 2019:28). Although women often occupy a lower social status, not all African women are excluded from

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playing essential roles in family units. Kuumba (2006:114) calls this 'female modes of resistance', which women play in institutionalised traditional African cultural systems. We locate the role of aunties in cultural ceremonies within this idea of female modes of resistance, whereby aunties carve out moments of agency and authority that resists the imposed lower social status. The functions are significant in that they disrupt patriarchal practices by enforcing a female presence that brings *bogadi* and Xhosa initiation ceremonies to completion; thus, these family events stand unfinished without the presence and participation of women.

There is developing literature around the role of aunties in family relations in feminist discourse. Therefore, it is commonly known that aunties, as extended kinship networks, have certain rights and responsibilities to their nieces and nephews (Ellingson & Sotirin 2006). In African cultures, aunties' roles and responsibilities mainly carry a certain social status and importance based on paternal and maternal relations. For example, an aunt from the paternal side plays a different role than an aunt from the maternal side. An aunt from the father's side in Tswana culture is known as *rakgadi*, while in the Xhosa culture, they are referred to as *udadobawo*, meaning my father's sister.

Aunts from the mother's side in Tswana are *mmamogolo*, an older mother in English, and a *makazi* in IsiXhosa. The younger sisters are known as *mmamane* for Tswana and *mamomncane* for IsiXhosa, which means younger mother. The older aunts tend to hold a higher social status than younger ones as age gives one a higher rank in most African cultures, and culturally, senior people are treated with deference (Schapera 2019:29). Their significance lies in the 'feminine-associated relational practices, which promote family care, kinship and feminine agency' (Sotirin & Ellingson 2007:442).

However, even though the significance of auntie is well-known in family structures, it remains understudied in the growing body of literature in South Africa. Much of the literature in African feminist discourse has included narratives and the roles of women within the family, such as the grandmother (Magoqwana 2018), mother (Hellemann 2021) and sister (Ndabula, Macleod & Saville-Young 2021), and very little is written about aunties.

Internationally, Ellingson and Sotirin (2006, 2010), and Sotirin and Ellingson (2007) reimagined and unearthed the significance of aunties in kinship structures. They have given us the impetus to continue the conversation about the importance of aunties and aunting in families. Although Ellingson and Sotirin (2006) have rearticulated the role of aunties, they provide a general view of aunties in everyday life. In this article, we focus on aunting in specific contexts in traditional ceremonies, whereby aunties are part of the process of constructing manhood in the *Xhosa* context and wifehood in *Tswana* culture. Through an African feminist theoretical lens and through an analytic autoethnographic methodology, we locate the African aunt as a key role player in traditional African practices (*bogadi* and *ulwaluko* in this

article), despite the patriarchal undertones embedded in these traditional practices.

Accordingly, we notice that the big part of autoethnography, whether evocative or analytical, requires the researcher to understand their experience in relation to others (Byczkowska-Owczarek 2014:12). Herein, although as authors, we come from two different cultural and ethnic backgrounds, we use our experiences of traditional ceremonies to explore connectedness in the roles our aunts played during the said ceremonies. Furthermore, we also make personal, cultural and social connections by articulating similarities and differences in how these aunties carry out their roles. The autoethnographic methodological approach allows us to narrate what we witnessed during the ceremonies. The witnessing put us in a privileged position to see our aunts carry out embodied roles of power and influence in spaces where men and patriarchal practices usually dominate.

Seeing aunty from an African feminist perspective

African feminism is a fitting theoretical lens to help us make sense of these roles because, as a school of thought, it has put a lot of effort into finding empowering ways of writing about African women's experiences. Like many other terms and social theories, there is no one definition of African feminism. Knowles (2021:5) observes multiple variations of African feminist theory and that it is more than a set of ideas about the experiences of black women and men. Similarly, Goredema (2010:36) states literature shows vast discourse ranging from seeing women as leaders in the pre-colonial era to creating a 'strong, black, selfless African woman' imagery in the post-colonial period. Guy-Sheftall (2003:32) observes that African feminism acknowledges its affinities with international feminism but delineates specific African feminism with needs and goals arising from the concerns about the realities of African women's challenges in their daily lives (Atanga 2013:304).

African feminist thought has largely analysed social relations through five, and others say six, categories useful in understanding layers of oppression African women face. Goredema (2010:35) observes the following five: '(1) Culture and tradition, (2) Socio-economic and socio-political issues, (3) The role of men, (4) Race, and (5) Sex and/or sexuality'. Unlike Goredema, Ogundipe-Leslie (1993:107) states that there are 'six categories of oppression which African women face daily, namely colonial oppressions, traditional structures, backwardness, men, race, herself'. But as Hellemann (2021:3) notes, 'their multi-faceted experiences of oppression do not limit African women; instead, they tend to overcome these challenges, as Ogundipe-Leslie affirms in her expansion of the theory'. Therefore, while we fully acknowledge the layers of oppression women face, in this article, we focus on how African aunties are key actors in largely patriarchal practices despite the layers of oppression.

The above-mentioned categories help us to understand how African women's leadership roles came to be despite oppression. Usually, this view emanates from the debate that before colonisation, African culture and tradition did not oppress women by limiting their social status; instead, they had leadership roles and powerful societal positions, as the historical narrative of Zulu royal women details (Goredema 2010:36). Their roles included participating in traditional ceremonies to perform sacred rituals such as weddings, womanhood initiation and war rituals, to name a few. From these noted lived experiences we understand the significance of the role that women would have played in family units. Out of African women's oppression, we draw on gender as a central focus here, with other oppression as intersections that help us understand the role of aunties in ceremonies as patriarchal spaces. We highlight the ways in which they use their agency to participate in masculinist-centric traditional activities, and illustrate their ability to carry out those actions (Chrisler & Johnston-Robledo 2018). We argue that in the African cultures discussed here, aunties are aware of the expectation to play these roles during ceremonies. Still, for them, the expectation does not come from oppression and pressure from men. Their participation is guided by the fact that they possess the knowledge required to complete these ceremonies.

Moreover, we witnessed how they performed their duties with care and love. Indeed, our aunts are mothers, but in African culture, their nieces and nephews are also regarded as their children. As Chilisa and Ntseane (2010:619) notice, African women produce knowledge in these roles, demonstrating their power and agency. This awareness shows aunting during ceremonies as embodied knowledge demonstrating African women's power and agency in African homes.

However, by observing the agency embedded in our aunts' actions, we cannot deny that the African traditional ceremonies remain patriarchal. However, as Mekgwe's (2008) characterisation of African feminism in Chilisa and Ntseane (2010:618), we 'explore traditional African cultures without denigrating them, understanding that these might be viewed differently'. In this instance, although society often sees African women as occupying a minor status based on the stereotypical gender roles they play in the family unit, we see these roles differently here. They are still family roles but have a higher status attached to them.

Witnessing our aunts doing aunting practices that are significant to traditional ceremonies demonstrated the authority and power the African female body and presence can have. We watched them assume these roles, thus transforming themselves into high-status personalities as their bodies mediated this transition. Moreover, our witnessing allowed us to see decades of knowledge in action. In these social contexts, it was evident that the aunts had prior knowledge of what needed to happen, which is attributed to years of learning from other aunts who passed on this knowledge. It affirmed that embodied knowledge

passed from one generation to the next to keep cultural practice and the social status of women alive was a necessary part of maintaining the aunt's relevance. Therefore, we reflect on what their actions revealed to us during the ceremonies. Although the ceremonies were about us, the aunties' roles were more significant as they had to perform rituals and processes that complete these rites of passage. In the following section, we each reflect on the meaning of the respective traditional ceremonies concerning personhood and identity-making. In this way, we seek to highlight the centrality of the aunt in practices that are key to the construction of personhood within African cultures.

Traditional ceremonies: *Ulwaluko* and *bogadi*

Bogadi is a significant practice that officiates marriages and unites two families. Various cultural groups commonly conduct this ceremony in heterosexual marital relations. However, as societies evolved, some families adapted it to be more inclusive, embracing the Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Queer and other (LGBTQ+) communities. I, Phemelo, write from a heterosexual point of view as I reflect on my own experience of *bogadi*. At its core, *bogadi* is a thanksgiving ceremony between the husband's and wife's people whereby the husband's family give cattle to the wife's family for raising their daughter, who is now allowed to marry her husband. The union becomes a 'contract between the two families rather than between two individuals' (Mulaudzi 2013:154).

However, *bogadi* is also often synonymous with fertility and procreation. According to Ellece (2012:91), anthropologists such as Schapera (2019) discovered a link between *bogadi* (bride price) and children as most of the payment revolves around that. This view is accepted and practised as the norm in many African cultures. As Mulaudzi (2013:154) affirms, it is common knowledge that an African (traditional) marriage not only 'unifies families within communities, but also serve a biological function of producing children as new members of the community'. Many African women go to great lengths to protect and embrace this as an African view of marriage.

Rakgadi, in Tswana culture, is supposed to receive reverence from her brother's children. Their parents often instruct the nieces and nephews to respect her and give her gifts whenever possible. As Schapera (2019:189) explains, traditionally, *rakgadi* was entitled to *dikgadi*, gifts she received from her brother's children. In return, she plays a vital role in her brother's children's marriage negotiations. According to Sotirin and Ellingson (2007:447), 'these women are custodial aunts who fulfill their responsibilities of taking care of their nieces and/or nephews'.

In the Xhosa culture, paternal aunties (*oodadobawo*) play an integral part during the ritualistic initiation process for boys known as *ulwaluko*. *Ulwaluko* refers to the customary rite of passage from boyhood to manhood undertaken by Xhosa boys aged 18 years and older (Mfecane 2016; Ntombana 2011; Vincent 2008). Manhood in the Xhosa culture refers to

being a man, which can only be achieved upon completing this rite of passage (Sipungu 2021). The ritual of passage embodies notions and meanings of manhood (Mfecane 2016; Siswana 2016). There is no other avenue through which a boy becomes a man other than the successful completion of *ulwaluko*. There is an expectation that every Xhosa boy should aspire to participate in this ritual process to attain this culturally exalted masculinity status of being *indoda* (a man). Gogela (2020:202) argues that 'failure to attend this prestigious traditional initiation school usually results in social stigma, prejudice and sometimes complete banishment by the society'.

While public discourse about *ulwaluko* often reduces the practice to the mere act of circumcision, Xhosa scholars of men and masculinities (Mayekiso 2017; Ncanca 2014) have cautioned against this reductionism in terms of meanings associated with the practice. Instead, they argue for a more holistic understanding of the ritual. In this regard, Siswana (2016:11) observes that the term *ulwaluko* in isiXhosa refers to the initiation ritual not limited to cutting the foreskin. Similarly, Ncanca (2014:37) also cautions against the perception of *ulwaluko* as merely the act of circumcising. *Ulwaluko* can be more accurately understood as a journey rather than as a singular event of circumcision (Mayekiso 2017:103). Ntombana (2009:75) also adds that the historical role of the rite of passage must be acknowledged and understood to arrive at more accurate meanings of the process. Through this holistic positioning of the practice, we locate the paternal aunt (*udadobawo*) as a key player in constructing Xhosa manhood masculinities. In this manner, *udadobawo* is important in three ways: (1) thaching the initiate's hut (*ibhuma/ibhoma*), (2) making the ritualistic necklace (*ubulunga*), (3) and admonishing the new man (*ukuyala*). *Udadobawo* has an elevated social status, the same as the father. There is no cultural expectation for them to play any other role in their nephews' life except during the process *ukuqatywa* and/or *imbeleko* which is the ceremonial introduction of a young person to the ancestors and the initiation process. However, this article focuses only on their roles during the latter practice.

When family relations are good, these aunts are often happy to participate in the rituals. However, some paternal aunts can be negligent, harmful or exploitative (Sotirin & Ellingson 2007:447). Therefore, stories of exploitative aunts are common among African families. It is not to suggest that all aunts are exploitative. However, *borakgadi/oodadobawo* are notorious for exploiting their nieces and nephews because their brothers have often given them too much authority over the children and the wife in some instances. Hence, it is common to hear paternal aunts' stories that strained family relations. *Borakgadi/oodadobawo* can often make unreasonable financial demands and claim their brother's wealth. We are fortunate to have come from families where our paternal.

Nonetheless, the Tswana and Xhosa cultures celebrate aunts from the paternal and maternal sides as mother figures with a meaningful role in family ceremonies.

As Sotirin and Ellingson (2007:443) affirm, auntling as the ideal of a mother comes with certain powers and privileges, which give them feminine agency. Although men dominate ceremonies such as *bogadi* and *ulwaluko*, African aunts are present and active in those spaces. The aunts bring feminine energy as custodians of certain cultural practices and pieces of knowledge. As Kuumba (2006:114) states, these roles operate as 'cultural carriers' that bring feminine agency as an oppositional practice to the dominant patriarchal space in traditional ceremonies. In such instances, men have no choice but to yield to the aunts' presence and power. Therefore, the aunts use their power and privilege to exercise autonomy and agency as African women actively creating and transforming cultural expressions (Kuumba 2006:114).

Research methods and design

This article employs a methodology grounded in personal reflections based on our experiences. This is where the data emanated from. As observed earlier, the study follows an analytic approach to autoethnography. Anderson (2006) and Byczkowska-Owczarek (2014:12) identify five features of analytic autoethnography for it to produce reliable results. Therefore, the methodology serves as both a data collection and an analytical approach is interpretive in nature. The first feature requires the researcher to be a complete member of the group they are studying so they do not misrepresent cultural practice (Anderson 2006:379; Byczkowska-Owczarek 2014:12). Both authors are full members of their respective cultural groups. They have lived within their ethnic communities from birth, which speaks to the in-depth knowledge and understanding of cultural practices in each designated group. I, Phemelo Hellemann, am a Motswana from Mahikeng in the North West province, South Africa. My husband paid *bogadi* to my family in 2011.

I, Thoko Sipungu, am a Xhosa man from Mthatha in the Eastern Cape province, South Africa. I underwent the process of Xhosa initiation in 2009. Therefore, our reflections in this article emerged from our experiences of being auntied during *bogadi* negotiations for Phemelo and the Xhosa initiation process for Thoko. Our aunts also come from the same cultural and ethnic groups as us.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects. Instead, we rely on our experiences and reflections as the primary sources of data collection on what we observed. We also do not reveal any cultural knowledge that might be deemed sensitive.

Researching through reflections and observations: An analysis

Our reflections analyse and highlight the role of aunts as moral and cultural gatekeepers in Tswana and Xhosa cultures during two different rites of passage. Here we use the second

feature of analytic autoethnography called 'analytic reflexivity' (Anderson 2006:382; Byczkowska-Owczarek 2014:13). It refers to the state of awareness of the relatedness the researcher shares with the phenomenon under study, the group under exploration, and the research field (Byczkowska-Owczarek 2014:13). It also creates a connection between one's experiences to the actions of others. Through the relatedness, the researcher can see, understand and interpret the actions of others through his own eyes (Byczkowska-Owczarek 2014). In this case, as noticed before, we are using our experiences of being auntied during traditional ceremonies to understand our aunts' actions as empowering and high-status duties. We allow our experiences to provide a lens to articulate their powerful position in their absence.

Moreover, the third feature, 'narrative visibility of the researcher' in the text, paved the way for us to connect our feelings and emotions, our aunts' actions and literature on aunting (Anderson 2006:383; Byczkowska-Owczarek 2014:13). Therefore, we intentionally make ourselves visible in this study by forming a point of view on the role of aunties in ceremonies. As Byczkowska-Owczarek (2014:13) states, narrative visibility goes beyond 'collecting facts about actions as it includes formulating a point of view' on what is being researched. Therefore, we also draw on existing literature on aunties, and scholarly research on *bogadi* and *ulwaluko* to validate our personal experiences. Thus, reflecting on our experiences, we have a dual role of being the researchers and the participants.

The fourth feature of analytic autoethnography requires the researcher to 'dialogue with informants beyond the self'. Anderson (2006:385) argues that because analytic autoethnographic researchers are 'confronted with self-related issues at every turn, the potential for self-absorption can loom large'. To avoid self-absorption, researchers should not abandon the 'ethnographic imperative to dialogue with "data" or "others"' (Anderson 2006:385). While we conducted no interviews for this article, we engaged in intense and critical dialogue with existing data and research about the respective cultural rites of passage and the role of aunties therein.

The fifth feature addresses the researcher's 'commitment to theoretical analysis or analytic agenda' (Anderson 2006:386; Byczkowska-Owczarek 2014:13). The aim of analytic autoethnography is not to journal the researcher's experiences but to use empirical data to gain insight into social phenomena to produce knowledge and construct theory (Anderson 2006; Byczkowska-Owczarek 2014). In this regard, we draw on our experiences of being auntied to argue about the understudied significance of maternal and paternal aunties in *bogadi* and *ulwaluko* traditional ceremonies, respectively. We also draw on the aunting scholarship developed in various parts of the world to construct and develop an in-depth understanding of the aunty with the key phenomenon by linking it to other literature on cultural practices and the role of women within the African feminist framework (Ellingson & Sotirin 2010;

Feminist Critical Hindu Studies Collective 2022; Khubchandani 2022).

The role of aunties in *bogadi*

In this section, I, Phemelo, reflect on my aunts' roles during my *bogadi* ceremony. As extended family members, my *rakgadi* and *mmamogolo* participated in the *bogadi* and wedding celebration as active and moral gatekeepers of how I ought to behave as a new bride. Their duties took on a female-centred practice that carried out domestic duties and imparted cultural knowledge and advice. I felt very honoured to have a group of women who had watched me grow up and welcomed me into their circle of married women. It was an emotional event for me as I witnessed the love and care that went into making that day a success. However, it is worth observing that the advice they give often carries a patriarchal undertone in these instances as it lends itself to the domestication of the bride and the reproduction narrative. As Ellece (2012:94) explains, procreation and the submissive wife narratives dominate African cultures. I did not enjoy this part of the ceremony. I identify as an African feminist, which means I am aware of the patriarchal oppression women face due to biological deterministic messages such as those demonstrated in the marital advice I received. However, because African communities are evolving, more women tend to challenge it by showing that women play more than a domestic role in the family unit. I might have identified better with such women, but I appreciated my aunts' efforts to share their experiences and knowledge.

Hospitality at the wedding feast

Here, I draw on my personal experience of my aunts' hospitality role at my *bogadi* ceremony. My *rakgadi* and *mmamogolo* played vital roles, from preparing the food for the guests to welcoming and serving the guest as new family members after the conclusion of the *bogadi*.

Because the *bogadi* ceremony occurred at my parents' house, my mother could not be the leader in catering and hosting my in-laws. Instead, my *mmamogolo* became the leader. She had to organise and orchestrate the menu and food distribution in this role. I was also confident she was the right person for this role because she is an excellent cook. I enjoyed this part of the ceremony because growing up, we always looked forward to the food variety served at family gatherings or functions.

She also held the key to the room where my mother kept the food and gifts from the in-laws. There is always a designated aunty in many African families who have the key to the room. This is the 'aunty with a key phenomenon' in this article. In this storeroom, the family keeps everything essential during traditional ceremonies, such as alcohol, food and gifts. The most trusted and stern aunt holds the key and is the only one with access to that room. Suppose the ceremony occurs in the paternal home; in that case, the *rakgadi* becomes the keyholder, but the eldest aunt keeps the key if the function is at the maternal home. The symbolism of holding the key lends itself to female authority and autonomy

in ceremonies. It is a cultural symbol of an aunts power during this period and a form of political agency.

As Kuumba (2006:116) explains, cultural symbols are expressions of political agency that transform traditional practices. In this case, it means that when women express or demonstrate their power in cultural spaces that are usually male-dominated, they perform the political act of transforming those spaces. An aunty with the key becomes the most influential person at family events because she is the go-to person for all the necessities that make the festivities. Whether elderly or young, even men approach this aunt respectfully and need her permission to enter the storeroom. However, she does not give them the key; she accompanies them to the room to get what they need once they have convinced her they need it. These interactions are often very entertaining to watch, especially when one realises they are a power showdown between men and one woman in charge. For me, they display women's power and authority publicly. In these moments, the aunts embody what African feminism is because they show how they have the authority to make me respect them, even within a limited social context such as *bogadi*.

This observation is a testament to the view that even though men tend to oppress women based on gender, African women have ways of overcoming or challenging these oppressions. But as Goredema (2010:37) states, just because African women take actions that challenge oppressive gender roles, it does not mean they are now going to call themselves feminists. Indeed, I take note of this argument because I do not believe that my aunts would call themselves feminists just because they have moments where they demonstrate more power and authority over men during the *bogadi* ceremony.

Receiving the gifts and presenting the bride

As observed earlier, *rakgadi* plays a vital role in marriage negotiations because she accompanies *bomalome*, the uncles. As a trusted paternal family member, she is included in *bogadi* talks of her brother's daughters because she receives part of the *bogadi* (Schapera 2019:189). During my *bogadi* negotiations, my *rakgadi* was part of the panel represented my family. Although I do not have a close relationship with *rakgadi*, I think she is a good person. I had no doubts or reservations about her ability to represent me well. However, I am unsure if she received part of the *bogadi*. Elders do not often discuss this; they consider it rude if I ask. She gave me a gift to symbolise her approval of my marriage, which I am not allowed to part with, no matter the circumstances. However, she was not the only woman present, as my *mmamogolo* was also there. They opened the gifts from my husband's family, and my *rakgadi* did most of the talking. Until this point, men do most of the talking, and once the two families have reached an agreement, the *rakgadi* takes over. She took the items individually and showed them to the panel while my *mmamogolo* wrote down a list of gifts.

Once *rakgadi* and *mmamogolo* acknowledged and received the gifts, *mmamogolo* presented all the gifts to unmarried daughters (there were two present, myself

included) to the visitors. *Rakgadi* asked them to identify the bride (me) in a lineup of unmarried women. What was particularly special about this moment was that my aunts worked well together and shared the authority and responsibilities accordingly. It was encouraging to witness this partnership and left me thinking about how much effort everyone put into making this day a success as a young woman who would most likely play an aunt role in the future.

Imparting marital advice: *Go laya* (admonishing the new bride)

Another role the aunts play during *bogadi* negotiations and celebrations is imparting marital advice. In Setswana, this is *go laya*. In this role, aunties serve as intellectual, cultural and moral gatekeepers of marriage practices and knowledge they pass on to the newlyweds. In this regard, married uncles and aunts from the two families are expected to counsel the couple. The counselling is for the day of the *bogadi* and anytime the couple faces problems in their marriage (Mulaudzi 2013:154). The counselling is free of charge. The advisors do not usually have formal training but rely on cultural knowledge and practices passed on from one generation to the other.

According to Ellece (2012:85), *go laya* in the *bogadi* phase is a pre-marital advice or counselling the bride is taught, by other 'married female members of her family, how to conduct herself in marriage'. As Mulaudzi (2013:145) affirms, pre-marital counselling involves specific values guiding young men and women, with clear expectations, meanings, and patterns the newly married must observe. The challenge, however, is that some of the advice the newlyweds receive, particularly the bride, is gendered. It often perpetuates gender stereotypes that limit women's worth and contribution to the household to domestic and reproductive work. Besides focusing on reproductive responsibilities, I received marital advice with suggestive gender stereotype narratives. I believe *golaya* can become a dividing moment in terms of which advice counts and which does not. In the African feminist discourse, Goredema (2010:38) calls this division an 'unflattering assertion, a jibe towards the description and value of the "real" African woman ... [who] is content with her subordinate position as wife, mother and beast of burden'. I often wondered how the aunts would have reacted to someone who opposed or challenged their patriarchal advice. Nonetheless, their guidance is secondary to their primary empowered actions as pre-marital counsellors.

Ellece (2012:91) writes extensively about the advice Tswana women receive during the *bogadi* ceremony. She draws on the experiences of two Tswana women, whom she refers to as *mmemogolo* and *monnawe*, whom she interviewed. *Mmemogolo* is the same as *mmamogolo* and *monnawe* means her younger sister. The two aunties share some insight into the new bride's advice from older women during the pre-marital counselling session. The eldest aunty usually speaks first. Ellece writes in a Botswana context, as her participants are Tswana. However, they have similar traits to the Tswana people in Mahikeng, in

the North West province of South Africa. As such, her observations and finding apply to the South African context. In this regard, *mmemogolo's* reflections and explanation of the knowledge-imparting ritual in Tswana culture highlight the role aunts play in *bogadi* ceremonies and the cultural knowledge they possess.

As Ellece (2012:85) narrates, according to *mmemogolo's* recollection of the marital advice ritual, there is a 'compulsory motherhood discourse which focuses on female fertility and is related to an overarching "wife as domestic discourse" because it re-affirms the domestic role of the woman as child-bearer and nurturer'. Although outsiders might view these discourses as oppressive towards women, people have internalised them as the norm for generations. Hence, the addresses are repeated and passed on by other women. Therefore, there is a collective understanding that motherhood and domestic wife discourses feed into preserving family lineage.

As Haselau, Kasiram and Simpson (2015:176) argue, when it comes to cultural practices such as marriage counselling among African communities, it is evident that African beliefs and views of marriage follow communality or *ubuntu*. In this regard, the wife's advice as an individual links her to the role she should play in the family as the latest addition to the collective family unit. Therefore, the expectation to procreate is embedded in her new role as a wife. As Ellece (2012:97) explains, 'procreation is not a matter of a couple's choice, but a societal requirement'. Hence, the advice the new wife receives is centred around procreation.

The aunts in the family induct her into this role through a *Rutu*, wedding and/or *bogadi* ritual. The ritual is a chant-type celebration activity intended to ensure she learns how to take care of her baby once she has one soon after marriage (Ellece 2012:88). As a result, the advice from the aunts:

[I]ncludes the use of language related to child care and simulates child care through ritual performance; thus, they perform their gendered identities as mothers themselves and teach the young bride how to be a good mother. (p. 88)

Beyond the gender stereotype narrative the ritual perpetuates, it is a valuable practice that initiates women into the next phase of their lives. Therefore, as a rite of passage ritual, the *rutu* is significant as a cultural practice. The ceremony also ensures that older women pass on the importance of motherhood to her as the next generation (Ellece 2012:89). However, the women are giving her advice, but they are also teaching her the marital ritual itself to participate in it during future family wedding ceremonies. The approach lends itself to the *ubuntu* ideals that encourage interconnectedness between generations. This way, the younger generation can observe and preserve cultural and family customary practices to share them with their children. Because African marriages create new biological bonds, the new bride joins in on the new family bonds and solidarity of practices (Haselau et al. 2015:175).

In this regard, the new bride should pay attention to some significant symbols and practices forming part of the *bogadi*. The aunties use the symbols as moral gatekeeping exercises to ensure the bride upholds her procreation 'duties'. As Ellece (2012) states, Batswana believes that:

[O]nce the bride is paid for, she 'signs' a procreation contract and this contract binds both herself and her family so that when she fails to give birth to a child, they too have breached the contract. (p. 97)

Although there are general Tswana symbols and practices, each family decides how they implement them. Therefore, it is not easy to pinpoint which ones are prominent. However, as I witnessed in my family, it is up to the aunts to decide how they approach the advice. In this regard, some families can be orthodox in their approach. At the same time, others tend to be contemporary in their application and thinking. Therefore, there was no extreme emphasis on me having a child soon after marriage. I had my first child after 9 years of marriage.

The role of *dadobawo* in *ulwaluko*: Making the necklace (*ubulunga*) and admonishing (*ukuyala*)

Some scholars have an evident consensus that the practice and machinations of *ulwaluko* are men's only business. Gogela (2020), for instance, has argued that the practice is steeped in patriarchy, and therefore, women are sidelined and marginalised, and their participation is considered taboo among AmaXhosa. Women possess little to no knowledge about the intricacies of the practice. Similarly, Nduna et al. (2015) have reduced the role of women in *ulwaluko* to that of 'cheerleaders' arguing that 'save for girls, who are related to and who cook for the initiate, women are generally not involved in the traditional process'. Contrary to these perspectives, in the following sections, Thoko highlights, through reflecting on his initiation journey, the centrality of aunts in the traditional initiation process in the Xhosa culture.

Building *Ibhuma* (initiate's hut) and making *Ubulunga* (initiate's necklace)

In line with Ellingson and Storin (2010:1), who position the 'aunt as a verb', in this section, I, Thoko, narrate my experiences of being auntied during the initiation (*ulwaluko*) process. Through a personal reflection and narration, with an analytic agenda, of my aunt's involvement in my own initiation into manhood, I show that paternal aunts have always held a significant place in the rite of passage. Therefore, paternal aunties (*oodadobawo*) are active agents, rather than passive cheerleaders, in the process of making Xhosa manhood masculinities. In this regard, this article also tentatively argues against the general perception in public discourse that the process of Xhosa initiation is entirely exclusionary towards women. In this light, the Eastern Cape House of Traditional Leaders has also engaged in discussions and proposals to include women in the process, particularly in light of the rising numbers of initiates dying during the initiation season (Jemsana-Mantashe 2019).

As mentioned here, aunties have always had a key but understated role in the Xhosa initiation process. For example, they are involved in the beginning stages of the initiation process as designated thatchers of the *ibhuma*, a thatched hut where the initiate stays for the duration of the process. The men are tasked with building the wood frame of *ibhuma* while the women thatch it with grass (Kaschula 1997). During my initiation process, my paternal aunt's and female cousins fetched the grass and thatched the hut where I stayed during the seclusion period of the rite of passage.

In addition, *udadobawo* is the designated person who makes the necklace that the initiate should wear during *umngcamo/umngcamiso*. Mdedetyana (2018:51), citing Nxamngxa (1971), describes *umngcamo* as a 'ritual animal sacrifice directed to the ancestors to attract their blessings to the boy'. Ntsaba (2002:107) identifies *umngcamo* as a core compulsory part in the initiation journey. Most of the literature on the initiation process confine the women in the domestic sphere of the household. However, during the *umngcamo* ceremony a necklace (*ubulunga*) made from the tail hair of the family animal is made for the initiate and placed around his neck for protection (Ncanca 2014:44). This literature is often silent about who makes the necklace for the initiate.

Contrary to the confinement of women in the domestic sphere during this ritual, *udadobawo* goes into the *kraal* (*ebuhlanti*) to extract fur from a cow or goat tail. After doing this, she joins the men already in the *kraal* and sits with them while making the necklace for the initiate. It is important to note that the *kraal* in Xhosa culture is traditionally a 'site regarded with high esteem, as it is a place where communication with ancestors takes place' (Kobo 2016:4). It is where the men sit during traditional ceremonies, and animals are slaughtered for rituals. Therefore, to have an aunt sitting among the patriarchs of the family in the *kraal* demonstrated her centrality in completing the ritual.

In addition, Mfecane (2018:297) notes that these ceremonies are not just public celebrations of the individual's automatic entry into particular life stages; they carry significant symbolic meanings about their relationship with their families, community, and ancestors. Therefore, by making the necklace, *udadobawo* performs the key ritualistic bonding between the initiate and his ancestors. In this light, the paternal aunt is a key figure in the initiation process because, without her role in the making of the necklace, the process remains incomplete.

Ukuyala (admonishing the new man)

The second significant practice of being auntied during my initiation journey was *ukuyalwa*. Like the necklace process explained here, the initiation process is incomplete without *ukuyalwa*. Mayekiso (2017:99) defines '*ukuyala* as the act of giving the new man advice and warnings on what to expect in life and also reminding him not to behave like he used to as a boy'. This practice is similar to the one done during *bogadi*. Here, the elders, women and men, give the initiate

'admonition and advice about the realities of life' (Siswana 2016:107). This practice, as seen in *bogadi* is a 'ritual of incorporation' in most African cultures (Mfecane 2018:297). Much like in the *bogadi* process, during the initiation process, *ukuyala* marks the beginning of the *umgidi* ceremony, which is a homecoming celebration for initiates.

The opportunity to admonish and advise is based on seniority. In my case, the men in my family, starting with my grandfather, had the first opportunity to impart wisdom and advice about my new chapter as a man. It is common practice for the men to get the first opportunity to admonish the new man (*ikrwala*). When the men finish, the women of the family and the eldest aunt who created the necklace (*ubulunga*) advise *ikrwala*. *Udadobawo* receives the honour and privilege of being the first woman to address the *ikrwala* because the family affords her the same status as her brother. Other women who entered the family through marriage, including my mother, were the last to advise me. Therefore, my aunt was a critical part of the Xhosa initiation process, from her thatching a hut for me, to making the ritualistic necklace (*ubulunga*) during *umngcamo* and being given the first chance to admonish me after the men. Similar to the advice the new wife receives during the *bogadi*, the advice *ikrwala* receives during *ulwaluko* can often have patriarchal connotations.

In addition to the roles that the *udadobawo* occupies, which inherently disrupt patriarchy where men congregate, she also occupies a domestic role in women-centred spaces during the *umgidi* celebration. Similar to *rakgadi* or *mmemogolo* (depending on whether the paternal or maternal family is the host), *Udadobawo* is often the one with the key to the room that contains both food and alcohol reserved for the festivities of the homecoming ceremony, known as *ikoyi* in isiXhosa. However, during my initiation, I had limited interactions with my aunt in her role as the keykeeper. I could not leave the room where my family welcomed me back home as a new man, as prescribed and instructed by the elders. I do recall that it was clear that she was in charge of administering additional food and alcohol to guests. She had the vested power and authority to manage the storeroom (*ikoyi*). *Udadobawo* became the most respected person during the *mgidi* by having the key. As the key keeper, *udadobawo* had the power and authority to manage the distribution of food and alcohol to guests. The key is testament to the power and authority she holds in the space, regardless of being a male-dominated arena.

Conclusion and recommendations

Through our experiences, we have articulated the importance of aunties in cultural ceremonies in a South African context. The article has built on growing literature on aunts as vital kinship resources. As noticed before, aunties in both *ulwaluko* and *bogadi* carry out domestic responsibilities but also perform duties that neutralise masculine energy in these spaces. In this regard, our aunties demonstrated that they are more than just caregivers. They are also active space invaders imbued with authority and

agency in traditional cultural ceremonies. Their feminine and political agency make them trailblazers. Although some of their advice may have patriarchal undertones, they still hold value as moral compasses in the rites of passage. The similarities in how both cultures, Xhosa and Tswana, allow for aunties to have a space for agency and authority show how there is still much to learn about cultural practices that promote female agency in patriarchal processes.

Through our experiences and narratives, we hope this article will add to the growing literature that seeks to write about African women in empowering ways. By doing this, we are showing that they, indeed African women, often create ways to challenge patriarchal oppressions in social and cultural settings. The discussion on auntying in the Tswana and Xhosa context has shown that these women are not only carving moments of agency but also knowledgeable in generational family practices and are vital players in preserving these customary practices. It is through them that female agency in African cultural practices and traditions is documented and articulated herein. We recommend that more empirical studies on the role of aunties in African traditional ceremonies be explored to expand the literature and visibility of African women. Moreover, there is a need to centralise aunty studies and the role of auntying in heritage and culture studies within the South African context.

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