An African methodology for South African Biblical Sciences: Revisiting the Bosadi (womanhood) approach

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ABSTRACT
A general perception that South Africa at least ideologically, is not an integral part of the African continent seems to persist in the minds of many South Africans, even ten years after the inauguration of the new democracy. It may be argued that such a perception is rooted in the colonial mentality, given the observation that though South Africa is a Black majority country, historically and even today the views of the West have continued to dominate our way of thinking.

This tendency to view South Africa through non-African eyes is evidenced by, among other factors, a general Western outlook on life. The latter is manifested not only in the everyday lives of the peoples of South Africa, but also in the nature of the curricula for higher education. The curricula for theological education and the biblical sciences (cf Old and New Testament Sciences, Biblical Studies, etc) are no exception in this regard. It is on account of this general tendency to alienate Africa in the South African biblical sciences methodologies, that I was prompted to develop an African-South African methodology. I have called this methodology the bosadi (womanhood) approach to the reading of biblical texts. In this paper I give a detailed discussion of the bosadi concept and the role which this methodology can play in foregrounding ‘Africa’ for the biblical sciences as they are offered in South Africa.

A INTRODUCTION

1 Any place for ‘Africa’ in South African biblical studies?
Let us imagine a cow that has grappled for some time with the appearance of her horns and the mockery she has endured from other animals about the alleged ugliness of her horns. Ultimately the cow succumbs to the pressure to have reconstructive surgery performed on her horns. In her view she had decided that the horns that would best suit her head would be those of the merino sheep.

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1 The original version of this paper was first read at the ‘African Biblical Hermeneutics Session’ of the Annual AAR/SBL Meeting in San Antonio, Texas, USA. The theme of the Session focused on methodological innovations in African Biblical Studies. The article appeared in the June 2005 issue of the SBL Forum. It is revised slightly and published here with permission from the editor.
I invite you to picture the sight of this cow after such ‘cosmetic’ surgery! The horns might be beautiful in her view and in the view of her mockers, but, ‘beautiful’ as they might be, they are not her original horns. They are artificial horns which will fail to serve the exact function of the original ones.

The Northern Sotho proverb says: dinaka tsa go rweswa ga di gomarele hlogo (counterfeit horns cannot stick permanently on a different head). The proverb’s meaning is: attempts at imitating others, however excellent they might be, will prove inefficient on account of their simulated nature.

Elsewhere (Masenya 2004a:457-458), I have used this proverb in conjunction with the folk tale of a hare which pretended unsuccessfully to be a lion(ess), to demonstrate the state of Biblical Studies/Old Testament Studies in present day South Africa (Masenya 2004a:456-458; cf also Masenya 2002:3-8). I have argued that the theological curricula as well as those of Old Testament Studies in South Africa, still rely heavily, if not totally, on the West rather than on Africa itself. I have shown that as a result of this dependence, a legacy inherited from colonial and apartheid South Africa, Old Testament scholars have produced graduates who, after completion of their studies, remain irrelevant to their African-South African contexts: a situation which is alarmingly similar to what used to be the case in apartheid theology during apartheid South Africa. In the latter context, the powerless were trained to read the Bible as though they were in power. For example, an African person generally ends up being trained to read the Bible as though s/he was White and a poor person could be steeped in elitist hermeneutics (cf Masenya 2004b:5).

I have shown the dilemma of an African scholar who chooses to be faithful to the context of many grassroots African Bible readers who do not have the luxury to carry out biblical hermeneutics distant from the harsh realities of life on the ground. Such a commitment is bound to earn one an insider-outsider status:

... ours is a theological education characterized by one assuming the role of an insider in one context and that of an outsider in another context. One becomes an insider as one is being trained as a student, an insider to the theologies which are foreign to oneself, an insider as one trains African students in Western-oriented studies of the Bible, an insider as one does research. If the research conducted is not played according to the rules inside the game, it will not earn this ‘insider/outsider’ accreditation to the Western academic status quo, which itself remains basically an outsider to the African status quo (Masenya 2004a:460).

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2 Cf my article (2002:3-8). In this article, I lament the basic absence of African-oriented Biblical Studies or Old Testament Studies in South Africa, irrespective of the latter’s geographical position on the African continent. For responses to this article, cf Himbaza (2002) and Holter (2002).

3 The apparently repetitive phrase ‘African-South African’ is used in this paper, as I usually do in my writings, to designate the indigenous peoples of South Africa. One finds in this category: the Pedis, Tswanas, Vendas, Xhosas, etc.
I have further argued that:

Even as one interacts with one’s colleagues, one is still confronted with these ‘insider/outsider’ dynamics. In an attempt to take off the lion(ess)’s skin/artificial horns, and to become an outsider to the academic status quo, one runs the risk of not making sense to one’s peers and of one’s methodologies being dubbed by some as being unscientific! In such circumstances, one cannot but suffer academic suffocation. It is no wonder that one usually finds African (out-of-South Africa) academic encounters quite refreshing and affirming, though we must acknowledge that there are other Western contexts which are willing to listen to African voices (2004a:460-461).

The above analysis is meant to inform the reader about the struggle which one still encounters in finding ‘Africa’ in South Africa despite the observation that we are already ten years into a democracy. The latter has enabled South Africa to come up with one of the most beautiful constitutions in the world, the beauty of which consists in its supposedly inherently liberatory nature.

This ‘othering’ of ‘Africa’ in South Africa is evident in the following examples:

It is commonplace to hear academics commenting as follows, ‘There are applications of students who come from Africa’, ‘I have been attending a conference in Africa’. Coupled with this, is the observation that even in continental and global circles, South Africa is usually viewed with esteem and appreciation. Almost everybody seems to wish to visit South Africa at some point in time. Why? Is it because of the alienation which South Africa has suffered through the years on account of the apartheid policy? Is it because of the resources easily tapped in terms of the lower exchange rates, particularly between the South African rand and the currencies of the North?

What is even more disturbing is that this ‘othering’ of Africa and African peoples is more glaring among fellow African persons. The negative appellation ‘makwere-kwere’ to refer to fellow African persons from other parts of Africa has said it all. It denotes the hate and denigration of African-South African peoples for fellow African peoples. This is an unfortunate xenophobic situation indeed, particularly given the important role which some of them played for many African-South African exiles during the apartheid era.

An important question for the present text is: If the African context is still ‘othered’ in South Africa, particularly in our theological and biblical hermeneutical

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4 This demeaning appellation stems from the ‘inability’ of African persons from other African countries on the continent to express themselves perfectly in the accent of the indigenous peoples of South Africa. This ‘imprecision’ is very natural in that if African-South Africans were to settle permanently in one of the African countries and venture to speak in the local indigenous languages, the same ‘imprecision’ would be heard from them!
endeavours, can we claim full liberation in the ‘non-sexist’, ‘non-racist’ post-apartheid South Africa?

In my quest to claim ‘Africa’ for South African biblical hermeneutics and to affirm the African-ness of African-South African women, I have developed what I have since called a bosadi approach to biblical texts (cf Masenya 1996).

The bosadi approach is the resolve of a process engaged to remove the artificial horns of other women gender discourses.

Given the diversity of women’s experiences covered by the women theologians in the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (cf also, Okure 2003:79; Mwaura 2003:78), a herstory of my initiation into women liberationist discourses (1996; 2004c), will reveal that I underwent two major horn surgeries.

Initially, after becoming attracted to women’s liberationist theologies through reading feminist resources, with no mentor by my side, I underwent my first surgery and came out sporting feminist horns. As I continued reading and teaching myself about issues pertaining to women (basadi), I came to realize that African American women (womanists) also articulate their own experiences in their search for affirming definitions of what it means to be a woman. I did not have to read many sources to understand that, probably sooner rather than later, I would need to undergo another surgical operation. Why? I found the situation of my African American sisters to be closer to that of African-South African women in terms of going beyond the gender category to address issues of class and race in their discourse. Indeed, I went into surgery again. I had to. All these surgical procedures were prompted by my desire to name myself appropriately. I noticed that given our racial history, a history in which African peoples were named and their culture defined, I needed even at the cost of being misunderstood, to name myself appropriately. I already knew then that it was going to be artificial if not impossible, to share the same gender biblical discourse with my white counterpart.

It was only when I was a visiting scholar in Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary in Evanston, Illinois in the United States, that I came to be aware that though African American womanism had close points of resemblance with what might be an African-South African biblical hermeneutical discourse, it was still uniquely African American. On account of this discovery, as well as my commitment to make ‘Africa’ a hermeneutical focus, I have decided to name my framework a bosadi (womanhood) approach to the reading of biblical texts. I therefore underwent

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5 In the light of this preoccupation with Africa and its concerns, it becomes a misunderstanding to regard the bosadi approach as a local approach, restricted only to the Northern Sotho (cf Nadar 2001:159; Maluleke 2001:243). Although the approach uses the Northern Sotho African-South African context as a point of departure, the goal was to develop, not only an African-South African woman-friendly biblical hermeneutic, BUT, an African one.
one more session of surgery which has enabled me to put on horns that will, for the first time hopefully stick!

What is this *bosadi* concept all about?

**B THE *BOSADI* BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS**

Since my employment of the concept ‘*bosadi*’ in several published works (Masenya 1997a; 1997b; 1997c; 1998), readers have drawn their own perceptions about this hermeneutics. Some have found close similarities between the *bosadi* approach and African inculturation hermeneutics. Plaatjie holds:

Masenya’s approach is somewhat akin to African inculturation hermeneutics, which compares biblical and African cultures. A feature that distinguishes Masenya’s approach from inculturation is that she foregrounds gender concerns (2001:121).

She devotes almost four pages to what one might to a large extent, call an unfounded critique of the *bosadi* approach (2001:124-128). In this critique, Plaatjie makes definite conclusive, yet erroneous assumptions regarding the *bosadi* concept. Her arguments were based on an article which was submitted to *Semeia* in 1995, while research on this same concept was still in process. Some such erroneous readings are in order from the above quotation: ‘Masenya’s approach is somewhat akin to African inculturation hermeneutics, which compares biblical and African cultures …’ (2001:121).

The *bosadi* approach is not simply a comparative analysis between the biblical text and the African culture. It critiques both cultures and texts not only in terms of gender concerns. It also includes issues of class, ‘woman-as-strange’ and ‘Africans-as-strange’ in their own territory. Unlike in many past black South African male theological discourses and those discourses which foreground inculturation hermeneutics, in the *bosadi* concept, the idea of the Bible as Word of God is not accepted uncritically (Masenya 2004c:24; cf Mosala 1991:50-60). In this approach, there is acknowledgement of how the notion of Israel’s election has been used in *apartheid* theology to justify the exploitation of Black peoples (cf Masenya 2004c:54-66). At the same time, though the *bosadi* concept is an attempt to resuscitate the African culture from the ashes, it does not idolize the culture as some have argued (cf Nadar 2001).

Perhaps the use of the word *bosadi* itself, has misled readers quickly to judge it as being culturally-oriented, preoccupied only with ‘ethnic’ concerns. Maluleke remarks:

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6 This article entitled: ‘Proverbs 31:10-31 in a South African context: A reading for the liberation of African (Northern Sotho) women’, was later published (cf Masenya 1997c: 55-68). A close reading of this article through the lens of Plaatjie’s critique, will also reveal her misunderstanding of the *bosadi* concept.
It is my reticence that Masenya’s proposal, although not always argued well and often misunderstood, blazes a new trail and holds great potential for future African hermeneutics. Unlike many critiques of Masenya, my reticence about bosadi has little to do with its ethnic tenor. Bosadi is no more ‘ethnic’ than Alice Walker’s womanism or Oduyoye’s bold and otherwise preposterous declaration that all African women are ‘daughters of Anowa’, an Akan woman. It is inadequate and ineffectual to engage Masenya at this level (2001:243).

Indeed, to those readers who choose to read this approach through Western eyes, the bosadi concept might appear ethnic and local. However, given the brief background on the need to foreground Africa given earlier on, it should be stated that the coinage of the bosadi concept was done not only with national and continental concerns in mind, but also with global concerns! To do this effectively, one had to start at home, from the African-South African setting. As I have stated elsewhere, the word mosadi does not only occur in the Northern Sotho setting, it also occurs, though in different words, in other African-South African languages: wansati (Xitsonga); umfazi (Zulu); musadzi (Tshivenda); mosadi (Tswana and Southern Sotho; 2004c:122). I have deliberately made the African-South African women’s context, the main hermeneutical focus by using a familiar word, a male-construct (cf. Maluleke 2001:243-244). I have therefore desired, first and foremost to be committed to my own context. The words of Okure concerning the desirability of a relationship between grassroots African women and professionally trained theologians seem to endorse my conviction:

Our greatest, but not yet fully tapped resources, are these so-called ordinary women. They are close to life at the grassroots; they see themselves in the texts of scripture and respect them as God’s abiding word, sometimes too literally and in ways that oppress than liberate them. The professionally trained African women theologians, on the other hand, can be tempted to subscribe to abstract ways of theologizing in order to find acceptance in the field. Thus they can lose focus on life, or seek answers to hermeneutical questions put by others, instead of identifying and addressing their own questions. The sisterhood in reading is needed by all (2003:74).

The bosadi concept cannot therefore, afford to be an elitist concept read and practised from the comfort of academic halls as Plaatjie argues: ‘... Masenya neither reads with nor from non-academic Northern Sotho women ... She chooses to speak for

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7 Although Maluleke is right in arguing that the bosadi concept is a male-construct, I find this to be an unfortunate criticism given the patriarchal history which has shaped the languages of the world. I am not aware of any words used to designate women for example, ‘woman’, ‘feminine’ and ‘female’ which were originally coined by women. In the light of such a history, I have employed this male-constructed terminology, and redefined it, to affirm those who have not only been named, but those whose roles have been defined and prescribed by outsiders to their gender (cf 2004c:122-158).
them, and places them in the role of sub-alters who cannot speak. Rather she theorises about the bosadi approach and applies it from the comfort of academic halls...’ (2001:127).

As I have already argued, reclaiming the use of the very African-South African indigenous word mosadi/bosadi is in my view, one demonstration of my commitment to African-South African women, particularly those at the grassroots. As these are women with whom I interact constantly in a more natural and spontaneous way, I do not need to conduct a Bible Study in order to ‘read with’ them. I pray with them, rejoice and weep with them. I sit at their feet, to hear them share from the Bible even as they also do likewise to me.

The bosadi approach also succeeds in enabling these women to read the Bible in a way which affirms them. My choice of this particular ‘elite’ text was motivated by my observation of how this same text is abused by the powerful to the detriment of the powerless grassroots woman ‘others’.

From the discussion in the above paragraphs, it can be argued that the major hermeneutical focus of the bosadi biblical hermeneutics is the unique experiences of an African-South African woman, with a view to her liberation. It is first and foremost, an African woman’s liberation hermeneutic. African women, facing such multiple life-denying forces as sexism in the broader South African society, inherited from the legacies of colonialism and apartheid, sexism in the African culture, post-apartheid racism, classism, HIV/AIDS, xenophobia are made the main hermeneutical focus. As in liberation theologies (cf Sugirtharajah 1991:436-437; West 2003:xvii-xviii), the experiences of the marginalized, in this case African-South African women, and not the contexts which produced the Bible, serve as the starting point of one’s encounter with the biblical text. The words of Renita Weems concerning African American women make sense in this regard:

Real flesh-and-blood people with real vested interests were behind the production and transmission of the Bible’s contents; and real flesh-and-blood readers are behind all modes of interpretations and readings with positions and agendas that prompt them to be more invested in one reading over another. The point here clearly is to decenter for marginalized readers the privileged status of the dominant readings and the dominant community of readers. A womanist biblical hermeneutics takes as its starting point the fundamental notion that people have power, not texts… women of color have to insist upon their right to read and interpret sacred texts for themselves and should not have to defend or apologize for their interpretations to privileged women in the (dominant) culture who remain ignorant to how race, class and colonialism shape and divide us as women (2003:26).

What is the place of the Christian Bible in the bosadi methodology? We now turn to this question:
C THE BIBLE IN THE BOSADI BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS

Underlying the use of the *bosadi* methodology is the presupposition of the powerful role which the Bible continues to play in African-South African women’s struggle for liberation and survival. As a matter of fact, the Bible as an important resource in African women’s lives is not only uniquely African-South African, it is also a key feature in the lives of African women on the continent. Oduyoye captures this central role of the Bible in Africa succinctly:

The Bible empowers us to proclaim God’s will in the name of Jesus and in the power of the Holy Spirit … The Spirit that came mightily at Pentecost is alive and well and powerful in African Christianity. ... The Bible has brought the message of hope to Africa and African Christians; therefore we hail and love the Bible. If one finds the Bible in a cot in Africa, one should know that it is a symbolic expression of God’s continued care of the whole of creation, especially of those too weak to fend for themselves (1995b:38).

In the *bosadi* approach, the positive role which the Christian Bible continues to play in the lives of African-South African women believers is acknowledged. African-South African women continue in faith, to experience the power of the risen Christ confirmed in their everyday lives. It is this power that enables them to cast out demons, to heal the sick and to proclaim liberation to those who are in bondage. These women are humbled by the belief in the Christ who identifies with those at the margins of society: the poor, women, Gentiles, et cetera. Hence, the important emphasis put on the Bible as word of God in this African-South African setting.

However, given the harsh reality of the use of the Bible to endorse patriarchal domination in South Africa, the *bosadi* concept is somewhat cautious about the notion of the Bible as ‘Word of God’. Elsewhere I have argued:

This rosy picture I have given about the Bible does not, however imply that the Bible is an innocent book. It does have the elements that alienate some people including women, the poor and dwellers in rural areas. Such areas reveal its ideological nature because the Bible is a human book. As I have argued, it is the responsibility of the interpreter to spot such elements and reject them for they will not be in line with the words of life which the Bible proclaims … the Bible is both oppressive and liberative. What would be beneficial, would be to look for relevant ways by which to render the Bible message relevant to Bible readers in 21st century post-apartheid South Africa (2004c:24).

In my interpretive context, as in other such contexts on the African continent, the Bible is approached with hope, with a view to transformation by its liberative power (cf Mwaura 2001:176; 2003:81; Okure 1995:55-56; Phiri 1997:55).

The *bosadi* approach’s foregrounding of the element of a believer’s faith makes sense in such a context (Masenya 2004c:11). The Bible is not viewed first and
foremost as a book for scholarly arguments and mental gymnastics. As word of God, it is believed to have power to change women’s situations positively (cf Masenya 2004c:24). It is no wonder that the authority of the Bible as word of God is taken for granted in such situations. Okure contends:

Such a reading implies that the reader is one who believes that he or she can discover life from the Bible. In other words, I am interested here, not in any scientific or literary reading of the Bible that leaves the believer’s life untouched by the exercise. I am concerned rather with a person who believes that the Bible is fundamentally the word of God, even though it has been expressed in human language with all its sociological and historical moorings. In this respect, the question whether or not the Bible can be regarded as word of God does not really arise … Readers who approach the Bible from this standpoint of faith … seek in it the message of God that can challenge, liberate, and energize their lives in their own social locations (1995:56).

An important question at this stage is: how may socially-engaged biblical scholars who use the critical tools of biblical scholarship interact in a more balanced way with readers who have such a strong commitment to the Bible as word of God?

If we are particularly concerned with making marginalized persons the main focus of our hermeneutical endeavours, we will also be open to engage their views in a more balanced way.

E CONCLUSION

As a methodology for the biblical sciences, the bosadi approach will prove helpful in the following ways, just to name a few:

1 The curricula for the biblical sciences in South Africa still rely heavily on the West. The bosadi approach with its commitment to the African context, can bring a balance to this situation. This balance will be achieved as the subject matter of these sciences is allowed to address issues of concern in the areas of poverty, unemployment, landlessness and HIV/AIDS to name but four.

As we foreground ‘Africa’ in our hermeneutical efforts, ‘Africa’ will be enabled to have an ‘active’ share in the global village.

What makes the bosadi methodology even more compelling in this regard, is its commitment to the context of African women in South Africa. The latter issue has received little attention from previous African, Black and liberation theologies. Issues pertaining to patriarchy, particularly in its multi-faceted forms in differing women’s contexts need to be treated as a matter of urgency in our biblical hermeneutical endeavours. However, it must be acknowledged that there are South African institutions which have made significant progress in this regard.
In fields such as the biblical sciences, whose methodologies have for so long been preoccupied with the ‘biblical past’, an approach which is committed to the context of the modern Bible reader, particularly if the latter has close affinities with the Bible, will prove to be beneficial. Approaches such as the *bosadi* one, is likely to attract many of these readers to scientific studies of the Bible.

Related to the preceding point, is the gap between an academic in the biblical sciences and a grassroots Bible reader. Through the employment of the *bosadi* methodology, with its recognition of the important role played by the Christian Bible among South African communities of faith as well as its critical approach towards the Bible, such a gap can be bridged.

The words of the former president of the Republic of South Africa, President Nelson Mandela on the African renaissance come to mind as I conclude this article:

> As we dream and work for the regeneration of our continent, we remain conscious that the African renaissance can only succeed as part of the development of a new and equitable world order in which *all the formerly colonized and marginalized take their rightful place, makers of history rather than the possessions of the others* (Crewys-Williams 2004:7).

In our attempt to create a new landscape for the biblical sciences in South Africa, prompted by our commitment to the African renaissance, let us develop methodologies that will do justice to ‘Africa’ and its various contexts.

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