

African Motherhood and *Bosadi* (Womanhood) among Pentecostals and Evangelicals: A Mohlakeng Perspective since the 1980s

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Abstract

This article looks at some lived experiences of five African women in Mohlakeng township, situated in the West Rand District Municipality of Gauteng, South Africa, between 1980 and 2018. Four are Pentecostal pastors and one is an Evangelical pastor. Their biggest challenge was to demonstrate that they were equally capable as their male counterparts in leading a local church and functioning as pastors. These women displayed aspects of African motherhood and *Bosadi* (womanhood) as three functioned as pastors and two functioned in other non-leadership roles alongside their male counterparts. The article applies a combination of participatory observation and literature review as a research method.

Keywords: African initiated; African motherhood; *Bosadi* (womanhood); economy; religion, pastors; *bomamosebeletsi*

Introduction

The debate about the rights and leadership of women these days is not new but more intensive, and this is also visible in circles of the African Initiated Churches (AICs). At the height of the struggle against apartheid between the 1970s to the 1990s, it was highly improbable to accept that a female Pentecostal or Evangelical believer could be a pastor. It was the same for the Independent Pentecostal Churches throughout the entire country. Women within these churches experienced plain oppression from their male counterparts in the church. Ramodibe (1996, 14) echoes the reality as follows:

I experienced terrible oppression from men in our society and even in the church, where I expected my salvation is coming. (Ramodibe 1996, 14)



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The expression by Ramodibe (1996) relating to the oppression of women above manifested itself from within our communities at large. The community and the church are male domains, with women placed at the tail end of development structures. This entrenched social-stratum was the same experience in the fourth and fifth-century writings, for example:

Suppose women were ordained as priests of God or anything canonical in the church, it should be anticipated to happen from the perspective of Mary the mother of Jesus. Worst of all, she was not entrusted with baptising. (Epiphanius, 166)¹

We may also view the above example as suggesting that women were not good enough to lead in the Christian church. It is also the same as the Setswana idiom “*ya etellwa ke tse tshgadi ya wela ka lengope*.” This idiom conveys the entrenched belief among Africans that female leadership may lead the community into trouble. On the contrary, the same community also teaches “*mmangwana o tshwara thipa ka fa bogaleng*.” It translates as “a mother handles the sharp point of a knife” to convey the entrenched belief that a mother will do everything to protect and provide for her family. These idioms create a feeling of tension among Tswana women and women in the African context. Though the community despises one side of the idiom, they equally acknowledge the other side of it. The Organisation of African Initiated Churches (OAIC) (Awinoh 2019), an international body of the AICs that was founded in 1975 in Nairobi, Kenya (Molobi 2011, 4), encourages women in leadership to form an integral part of envisioning a better world.² The research objective of this study is to describe how five women displayed the aspects of African motherhood and *Bosadi* (womanhood) while serving in the ministry.

The following sections entail a brief background of Mohlakeng township; a discussion of women in ministry; the experiences of five women in the study; a look at gender equality in education; and African motherhood and *Bosadi* (womanhood). We also explore the control of religion or culture; the control of the subsistence economy or the market; and placing the community at the centre.

Mohlakeng Township

We start by describing Mohlakeng township since it is the place where the women came from and it is the context of their operations in the 1980s. Mohlakeng is a township near Randfontein (now part of the new Rand West City Local Municipality formed after merging the former Randfontein Local Municipality and the former Westonaria Local Municipality). It forms part of the West Rand Gold belt towards Carletonville. Initially, its residents stayed in Titi or Madubulaville in the 1950s and 1960s before the forced removal programme of the apartheid regime that shifted them to Mohlakeng in the early

1 Also refer to Latourette (1964, 292–293), “History of Christianity,” by London Eye and Spottiswoode.

2 Refer to <https://www.oaic.org/?p=1962>.

1960s. Residents who were members of mission established churches, AICs and the two holiness churches continued with their church attendance in the new area. By the mid-1980s, two mission established Pentecostal Churches (Apostolic Faith Mission and International Assemblies of God) and one independent Pentecostal Church (Back-to-God-Assemblies of God) were planted in the area. The African Evangelical Church, Batho-Botlhe Baptist Church, Let My People Go Ministries, and Ebenezer Bible Church were planted between 1980 and 1990.

Women in Ministry

Prior to 1976 to the late 1980s, literature was male dominant. Organisationally, for instance, among the African Pentecostals very little was said by women. The Pan African Christian Leadership Assembly (PACLA) publication, *Facing the New Challenges*, was edited by Michael Cassidy (1976) in Nairobi, Kenya. This compilation has the voice of one woman, Miss Dube, among many men, interestingly focusing on “Reaching Young People.” She discusses issues like problems and interests, bridging the generational gap and creating a favourable environment among young people (Cassidy 1976, 540–543). It has been a burning issue since 1976 and beyond. The other book supporting women’s space to share their thoughts was *Christianity in Culture* by Charles Kraft (1984). Kraft (1984, 59) concludes that “over and above security” women or people of the opposite sex need freedom equal to their male counterparts.

In another book, *Preaching and the Bible in African Churches*, by Hillary Mijoka (2001), African Independent Churches’ (AICs) sermons (captured from male preachers) mostly do not support the role of women as equals. However, other works of literature, like “Mustard Seeds” by the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC 2005) display the women’s actions against poverty in South Africa. It is all about women caring for their families, including husbands, in spite of the pressure from their daily household chores.

Therefore, we cannot treat the role of women as if it is equal across the board. It is in this spirit that Keri Day (2012) entitled her book, *Black Women, Black Church, and the Struggle to Thrive in America*. For a Black woman, she is specific about poverty as part of the package in the lives of Black women. She terms this process “an unfinished business.” She employs the term “thrive” for both economic and political challenges (Day 2012, 181). From the viewpoint of the church, women’s leadership in partnership with their male counterparts was supposed to be the driver of this possible equality. The last book that one can consult on this matter is titled, *To Speak or not to Speak: What Does the Bible Say about Women Preachers?* by Bishop H.R. Griffin (2020). The emphasis in Griffin’s work is the equality of women with men in every sphere of work within the church.

The Five Women of our Focus

This article uses participant observation (Kawulich 2005, 2–3) to discuss the lived experiences of the five³ female Pentecostal and Evangelical leaders who emerged in the 1970s and the 1980s in Mohlakeng and interacted with the authors while serving in their respective churches to date. Two of these women are the oldest and were pastors' wives when they began to serve in ministry before the 1980s. These women are Mrs Zwane of the Church of the Nazarene and the late Mrs Morake of the International Assemblies of God. Even though these two women had obtained theological training, their local assemblies did not allow them to function as pastors. They were only allowed to function in Sunday school activities. Hence, they ended up operating day-care centres for the community.

The remaining three women entered ministry during the context of the struggle against apartheid in the mid-1980s, a time that produced the Kairos document to denounce state theology. Mzondi (2019, 93–96) associates this context with “radical Pentecostalism among African Township Pentecostals.” Mzondi also took a stance against apartheid in the mid-1980s and joined a wider group of Concerned Evangelicals (CE) to produce Evangelical Witness in South Africa (EWISA).

The third woman, pastor Tshepiso Mokoena of Community Christian Church, is younger than the first two and older than the other two women. Tshepiso Mokwena is famous for spiritual healing, exorcism and preaching. Her functions and roles (Ngada and Mofokeng 2001, 47) emphasise that unlike many mission established churches, women within AICs function as prophets, healers, deacons, priests, bishops, and archbishops. The last two women are pastor Buyi Zulu of Amazing Grace Tabernacle and pastor Matlalepula Setlhodi of Ebenezer Bible Church. The former obtained theological training and serves the community as a motivational speaker in one of the Ukhozi FM programmes. The latter is a qualified educator and obtained theological training. It is noteworthy that these two women have become role models for young female Christians within Pentecostal-Evangelical circles in Mohlakeng and beyond.

Gender Equality in Education

There is an important point in the field of education relating to the issue of gender, especially among the AICs (Molobi 2008). As much as the poor communities support the input of women, it is essential for a better future. For instance, Ngada and Mofokeng (2001, 47) have indicated that in the AICs, unlike in many other churches, frequently women prophets, healers, deacons, priests, bishops, and archbishops are at the forefront of church activities. According to them, gender is not such an issue as in the mainline churches (Ngada and Mofokeng 2001, 47).

3 Only pastor Buyi Zulu and pastor Matlalepula Setlhodi were alive at the time of writing the article. Verbal consent to use their experiences was secured from them.

We have researched more than 600 AIC denominations in and around Pretoria between 1992 and 2007, and have interviewed many women ministers, bishops and archbishops, including prophets and prophetesses. We have heard and observed that some of the prophets appointed bishops, archbishops, and ministers who are both male and female. However, AICs are known to be part of the weaker community in terms of economic resourcefulness, and this has an effect on women's contributions. We are justified in mentioning the information below from the perspective of the poverty margin. There is a considerable volume of literature demonstrating that improvements in gender equality in education are vital for reaching all the Millennium Development Goals (Abu-Ghaida and Klasen 2004). It particularly leads to more robust growth and thus lower poverty levels, as society makes better use of its human resources.

One other area of concern that slows down positive action against gender inequality lies within the heartbeat of indigenous traditions. As much as one respects one's tradition and culture, some practices are cause for concern. For instance, mothers will give birth to boys and girls, but certain practices create rifts between girls (weaker vessels) and boys as they grow older. In his work entitled "Simply Ask," Lubbe (2008, 11) gives the following anecdote:

A female patient removed the sterile dressing that covered the wound on her head in an attempt to cover her head. It was during the visiting hour, and her mother-in-law approached her. According to Zulu custom, married women are supposed to cover their heads with scarves at all times as a sign of respect. The non-Zulu nurse who observed this remarked: "I was shocked to see what she did. It was a learning experience for me because I did not know that Zulu females are supposed to keep their heads covered." (Lubbe 2008, 11)

In Africa, certain practices are more severe than said in the above example. Physical health will also include harmony with the coordinated universe (Lubbe 2008, 13). Health, balance, peace, order, and continuity represent the goals towards which Africans strive. We state this to show the depth of this culture in some traditions. For example, a woman will rather endure abuse in the name of a legal obligation than challenge the actions of the other. Gender equality and education need to be robustly engaged with one another to break down the walls of abuse and to transform some instances of abuse that occur within its objective modes.

An African should not hesitate to express the ubuntu⁴ phenomenon in the African context; expressing its valuable meaning, but at the same time criticising its wrongful consequences for contaminating the development of people rather than their improvement. In South Africa, the hurt of African brokenness and disrupted "family-

4 In the African sense, ubuntu is a foundation of human relations in African societies. It runs through the veins of all Africans (Khoza 1994, 1).

ness” caused by the gold rush (and the consequent development of compounds, hostels and squatter camps) is still felt to date (Joseph 2014; Vosloo 2020).

The AICs women were subjected to patriarchy—they were relegated to the lowest rungs within and outside the church. Some have viewed these roles as indicative of their value only in a physical presence, although they were regarded as mentally backward within the AICs. In rejection of this notion, Sundkler (1976, 68) emphasises the role of E. Mdlalose, Grace Tshabalala, Miss Nku and Miss Mbele (Sundkler 1976, 92). Moreover, he acknowledges the latter two as having established themselves as outstanding leaders in their assemblies. In addition, they became financially strong in their evangelical outreach. Furthermore, these AIC women were unwilling to subjugate themselves to male domination. Instead, it was the raising of their voices outside the church that made them famous leaders.

African Motherhood and *Bosadi* (Womanhood)

Oduyoye (1988) indicates that Jesus possesses mother-like qualities (motherhood) displayed through associating and speaking for the poor, oppressed and marginalised. Like a mother, Jesus incarnates into the experiences of those who suffer to change their predicament through caring, loving and offering hope (Oduyoye 1988, 32). To this, Masenya (2008; 2010) adds the concept of *Bosadi*, which translates as “motherhood,” to argue for a critical promotion of the African family and the community spirit of ubuntu to transform the whole society. The two approaches address the tension that African women experience as they are given a lowly status in the community while they are providing the essential function of motherhood.

The tension of being despised and discredited among Africans is expressed in two influential national views and actions led by Christian women in South Africa. The first expression is in the slogan “*wathint’ abafazi, wathint’ imbokodo*” (you strike a woman, you hit a rock). In 1956, women marched to the Union Buildings against pass laws. Charlotte Maxeke, a devout AME Christian (Nhlapo 1949), was one of the influential figures that organised this historic march. The second instance is the women of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA) resolving to resort to their spiritual roles in the community to fight patriarchy in all spheres of life by forming a prayer group called Manyano (Hastings 1979, 115). Furthermore, Hastings (1979, 11) and Sundkler (1962, 164) observe the same spirituality among the women of dikereke tsa Postola (St John Apostolic Faith Mission Church and its splinter groups) and amaZioni (Zionists churches).

The experiences of some African Christian women between 1984 and 2018 in Mohlakeng have been highlighted in the previous paragraph. These women are from mission Pentecostal Churches (the Apostolic Faith Mission, the Full Gospel Church of God, and the International Assemblies of God), as well as Nicholas Bhengu’s branch of Back-to-God-Assemblies of God and some independent Pentecostal Churches that emerged during the mid-1980s. All these churches are patriarchal in structure and

practice. The experiences of these women resonate with those observed among women of the Christ Apostolic Church of Nigeria:

One sister commented that someone has to speak for the women in this church because they treated them as second-class citizens. Where do women fit into the hierarchy at Christ Apostolic Church International (CACI)? An examination of the church leadership shows all Apostles at CACI are men. There are no women Apostles. Yes, the churches may have women deacons, but where does the real power lie? Why are women who speak in tongues; who prophesy as the men, not called Apostles? Why are only men with this title? (Shaw-Taylor 2013, 9)

Patriarchy has placed these five women in an uninspiring place, at the bottom of church leadership in the same way ubuntu placed them in an inferior position within the community (Mzondi 2015, 229–242). The two elderly women in our study mentioned above found solace in leading children’s ministry in their respective local churches. One continued her work in children’s ministry through an Early Child Development Centre she had established in the township. Her action resonates with Amadiume (1997, 102), who points out that Africans were agriculturalists years ago. Moreover, women were soil tillers while men were hunters. This positioned women to be the mistress of the house and keeper of the food; ultimately, a woman’s power was based on her crucial and central economic role. This reiterates the concept of African motherhood (Muthien 2008; Oduyoye 1988; Oyěwùmi 2003), which is characterised by the values of love, harmony, peace and cooperation, self-sacrifice and lack of bloodshed (Amadiume 1997, 102, 122). Amadiume (1997, 165–166, 177, 196) further mentions that African women possess three power bases, namely, “the control of religion or culture”; “the control of the subsistence economy or the market”; and “autonomy/self-government.” Below, we discuss “the control of religion or culture” and “the control of the subsistence economy or the market.”

The Control of Religion or Culture

Nicholas Bhengu’s vision discussed above points out the African mother and her unlimited sacred authority, which finds reflection in the widened spread of divinity faith; in African Indigenous Religions, and mystical powers inherited from the mother (Amadiume 1997, 102). The Rain Queen, Queen Modjadji (Rafapa 2008, 51–62) and Queen Mother at eSwatini (Mabuza 2006, 29) indicate a mystical power associated with African motherhood. Such power is aptly expressed in the work of MaNku (the first woman to establish an independent church in South Africa in 1939). Sundkler (1976, 84) mentions that:

MaNku is one of those who walk among the thousands of her faithful assembled for annual festivals. However, when the charming woman leads the flock packed into her big church, one soon discovers something of her power.

MaNku’s role in her church contradicts a male’s role, where the father acts as a leader and links the family and the ancestors (Shoko 2007, 82). The same contradiction is

noticed among African Pentecostal Christians in Mohlakeng. However, some developments that challenged the *status quo* occurred in the area two years prior to and after the 1994 elections that ushered in a democratic, non-racial, non-sexist and tolerant South Africa. Three female African Pentecostals expressed their conviction that God had called them to enter the ministry.

Prior to expressing their conviction to enter the ministry, Buyi Zulu and Matlalepula Setlhodi attended a vibrant interdenominational pro-Pentecostal youth club called New Life Christian Movement in Mohlakeng. Zulu was later associated with the Back-to-God-Assemblies of God, while Setlhodi was associated with the Church of the Nazarine. Tshepiso Mokoena was associated with the African Evangelical Church. Zulu and Mokoena intimately interacted with the ministry and preaching of evangelist Alson “Ginger” Nene (Radebe 2021, 60) who established the African Evangelical Church in Mohlakeng and was a pastor associated with the Back-to-God-Assemblies of God (Radebe 2021, 38–39). Both are functioning within independent Pentecostal Churches (Amazing Grace Tabernacle, Zulu established, and Community Christian Church, established by a male founder) while Setlhodi functions in an independent Evangelical church (Ebenezer Bible Church). In addition, Setlhodi and Zulu have attended theological training.

Armed with these credentials, it was not easy for them to function within a male-dominated pastoral terrain. Although ordained and serving as pastors, it was still challenging for them to be recognised and accorded their correct religious position because of existing patriarchal stereotypes among Pentecostals in the township. Male pastors of Mission Pentecostal Churches and Independent Pentecostal Churches and their church members struggled to address these women as pastors, like their male counterparts. A reality, described in Masenya’s personal experience, holds that the South African men know reasonably well how painful it was and still is to be dehumanised.

Based on Blackness, they had difficulty accepting their sisters based on certain existing stereotypes and beliefs, which promote the view that a woman is less important than a man. Further, that women’s inferiority was divinely ordained, and [they] cannot, as a result, be a leader. (Masenya 2008, 9–10)

Habitually, these leaders and their members find it easier to refer to them as *Mamoruti* (Setswana/Sesotho) or *uMam’ umfundisi* (isiZulu/isiXhosa) translated as “pastor’s wife” instead of *Moruti* (Setswana/Sesotho), or *Mfundisi* (isiZulu/isiXhosa) translated as “pastor.”

The stereotyping among the Pentecostal community did not accord them space to function and occupy the power base of “the control of religion and culture.” It was contrary to the practice of allowing women within Manku’s St John Apostolic Faith Mission and its splinter churches in Mohlakeng to occupy and function within the power base of “the control of religion and culture” as they functioned as *Mamosebeletsi* (one

who helps others). *Mamosebeletsi* means a seer or prophet (Modiko 2011, 162) and commands respect in these churches' communities and non-members. Daneel (2001, 254) succinctly mentions that women in these churches elevate their spiritual status and function as intercessors and healers in the community. That being the case, some male Pentecostal and Evangelical pastors in Mohlakeng give these three female Pentecostal pastors moral support. They have encouraged their male counterparts to accept them as fellow servants of God, just as the apostle Paul recognised Phoebe, Priscilla and Junia (cf. Romans 16, 1–5; 10).

Over time, the abovementioned women's efforts yielded positive results as other male Pentecostal pastors in Mohlakeng began to change their attitude and recognised them as fellow servants. This change of mindset also assisted their church members in accepting these women as servants of God. Consequently, these female Pentecostal pastors have occupied the power base of "the control of religion and culture" like their counterparts within the St John Apostolic Faith Mission Church and its splinter churches in Mohlakeng.

These Pentecostal women pastors have managed to hold on to their conviction that God has called them throughout this period of denial and being undermined by male Pentecostal leaders and their congregations. Few as they were, these women are now the trailblazers of women Pentecostal-Evangelical leadership in the township. They have managed to shift some Pentecostal-Evangelical stereotypes among Pentecostals and Evangelicals in the area. Without advocating to be treated equally as their male counterparts, they have demonstrated that God does call women to enter into ministry in the same way he does with men.

The Control of the Subsistence Economy or the Market

Historically, the Back-to-God-Assemblies of God does not recognise females to function as pastors. A shift in recognising the role of women in the church occurred when Rev. Nicholas Bhengu saw a vision in Brooklyn, New York, United States America, while on a fund-raising trip. According to Lephoko (2005, 50), during one of his praying sessions, Bhengu saw a vision of an African woman wearing a "doek" (headgear) and heard the voice of God asking and saying, "Do you see that woman? Go back to your country; you will get the money that you need to do my work from people like this woman."

It is reported that he trained four women, including his first wife, to raise funds when he reached home. By 1970, a large group of women were taught to train other women in handwork and small enterprises to earn an income to support themselves and Back-to-God (Bhengu's evangelism organisation); later, these women were called organisers (Lephoko 2005, 50). This practice continues to date in this church. The most exciting aspects of Bhengu's vision are the "doek" (headgear) and the explanation that he would get his money from people like "that woman." This also seems to concur with West's (1975, 14) observation that women in Soweto contribute to most families' survival. The

Department of Women of the Republic of South Africa (2015) in their document, “The Status of Women in the South African Economy,” mention that:

Household production consists of productive activities not resulting in market goods or services and, despite the name, includes activities performed outside the household for no household members, such as care for persons in other families. This underestimation of women’s contributions arises since while national accounts include market and non-market goods and services for all other institutional sectors, they exclude non-market services for households. (Department of Women, of the Republic of South Africa 2015, 131)

The above phenomenon concurs with that mentioned by Amadiume (1997, 102, 122) and points to Nicholas Bhengu’s vision that emphasises the African woman’s vital contribution to the community and the church. This hints at the values of “love, harmony, peace and cooperation and self-sacrifice” associated with African motherhood. The value of “self-sacrifice” points to placing the community at heart. Thus, we have discussed it in this article to show the importance of African motherhood and *Bosadi* (womanhood) in the ministry of women.

Placing the Community at the Centre

African motherhood and *Bosadi* (womanhood) place the community at the centre. The name *Mamosebeletsi* echoes her primary task, namely, to help others. Being a *Mamosebeletsi* is not about personal gain or fame, but it is about helping the community. Again, this is a display of African motherhood or *Bosadi* (womanhood). Hence, the following explanation:

Mother-derived ties are the most culturally significant, and [that] mothers have agency and power. Fundamentally, motherhood is not a concept in opposition to fatherhood; it is in its own right. Mothers are powerful—literally and mystically, from the well-being of their children. Therefore, they are the pivot around which family life evolves, and the child’s life rotates. Motherhood is the most important source and model of solidarity, and being a mother is perceived as an attractive and desirable goal to achieve. The privileging of motherhood in the African family organisation contrasts with the ambivalence about motherhood in feminism. (Oyěwùmi 2003, 12–13)

Bosadi, which translates as “motherhood,” critically promotes the African family and the spirit of ubuntu to promote the inclusive benefit of all members of the community (Masenya 2008, 2010). Such a view advocates that African women are intrinsically inclined to serve the family and place the community first, as Oyěwùmi (2003, 12–13) explains.

The task of *Mamosebeletsi* and a female Pentecostal and Evangelical pastor places the community above the individual; this is an attitude inherited from their mothers, grandmothers and other mothers, and it resonates with the concept of African motherhood (Ngunjiri 2009, 11–12) and *Bosadi* (womanhood) (Masenya 1997; 1999).

It is observed in the fact that two female Pentecostal pastors and one Evangelical pastor serve as leaders and benefit the community. Two of the pastors continue to make a meaningful contribution to the community's socio-economic development. This is done through the platforms of primary education (reaching primary learners in the West Rand District Municipality) and a radio ministry, which reaches thousands of isiZulu speaking communities in the Provinces of Gauteng and Natal. In contrast, the third makes a meaningful contribution through her healing and deliverance ministry.

Conclusion

Women are (were) publicly denied leadership roles among Independent Pentecostal Churches. In the same way, they were restricted among established mission Pentecostal Churches. This article has presented four female Pentecostal pastors, and one female Evangelical pastor living in and around Mohlakeng township, one of the West Rand District Municipality townships in Gauteng, South Africa. Two of them entered ministry many years before the 1994 democratic elections in South Africa. Two to three years before the 1994 democratic election and after, two female Pentecostal members and one female Evangelical member vocalised their convictions that the same God who called men to enter the ministry has called them. Although it was not an easy road to travel, these women have managed to ride the rough waves of male discrimination and opposition. They formed the spine of the women's subsistence economy and contributed to the recognition of women as Christian leaders.

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