

**Is Ruth the 'ēšet ḥayil for real?
An exploration of womanhood from African proverbs
to the threshing floor (Ruth 3:1-13)**

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Abstract

Contradictory definitions of what a worthy womanhood is, have in many contexts, including African contexts, caused divisions within religious institutions, families and communities at large.

In Christian African contexts, definitions of worthy womanhood emerging from various Bible interpretations, and shaped by different African cultures, have influenced and continue to influence views concerning women and men, boy- and girl-children, even as these mould our definitions of what affirming gender relationships (should) entail.

In Ruth 3:11, Boaz, the wealthy Judahite man, informs Ruth, the poor foreign (Moabite) widow, that the assembly of Judahite men *knows* that she is the 'ēšet ḥayil, the woman of substance. Which images of womanhood are revealed when some African proverbs are read in conjunction with Boaz's words in Ruth 3:11? Do these images indeed reveal Ruth as the woman of substance? Do they resonate with those who seek affirming definitions of womanhood in our African contexts? This article will address these questions, among others.

Introduction

This article, like other articles in this volume, celebrates a very important voice in South Africa's history of liberation theology, and in African theological circles both on the African continent and abroad. This is the voice of Professor Simon Sekomane Maimela. The topic presented in this article may appear misplaced, but I will be addressing its relevance.

The scarcity of black female theological voices during the apartheid period in South Africa was most probably linked to, among others, the definition(s) of what worthy womanhood entailed then and probably to a great extent represents today. In the past a woman would have opted first and foremost for a heterosexual marriage, rather than equipping herself through

education (let alone a theological education), and would have assumed marriage's concomitant expectations of taking full care of the patriarchal household. Today, many African girl-children and young female adults, depending on their socioeconomic situation, will give preference to education *as well as* heterosexual marriage. Some opt only for the latter.

It is fitting to discuss the present topic in a context such as ours, which sets great store by human rights, the affirmation of the rights of historically marginalised persons, such as women, gays and lesbians, and the affirmation of all cultures and their epistemologies, including African epistemologies.

Same story, different ideologies and agendas

African women-writers who are keen to come up with women-affirming interpretations of the Christian Bible usually face this challenge: it is almost as difficult to find African women's writings/commentaries on biblical books as it is to retrieve the voices of women whose stories we encounter in the Bible. The primary text, upon which the discussion of this article is based, is Ruth 3:11. From this particular text, readers are permitted a glimpse of what a worthy woman was in the world during Ruth's time, albeit not from the viewpoint of women themselves. Consider the character of Ruth in this particular case. The reader is not given a glimpse of what Ruth's viewpoint is regarding worthy womanhood, but rather that of the narrator. It is the male viewpoint pertaining to the views of the assembly of Boaz's people/men which is presented.

In my view, what hinders present-day Bible readers' appreciation for the content of the biblical books is that the books are informed by the ideologies and the agendas of the narrators. As can be expected, these are far different from those of present-day Bible readers. In such instances the product of the reading process, though informed by the story, might be a total deviation from what the story was meant to convey. This argument should, however, not give an impression that there is any perfect methodology which has the capacity to retrieve fully what the original authors sought to communicate. All scholarly efforts at reaching such a goal will essentially be informed speculations and probabilities.

An example of how different the modern Bible reader's agenda might be from the agenda of the narrator/author of the original story will hopefully become evident in the following paragraphs. As previously noted, the aim of this investigation is to interrogate Boaz's statement on the worthiness of Ruth in Ruth 3:11 in conjunction with images of womanhood arising from some African proverbs, and to see how affirming such images are to those women who choose to find their identities within, among others, the African culture and the Christian Bible.

The Book of Ruth has previously enjoyed, and still enjoys, various readings from women-authors. It has been read as the narrative which reveals the cooperation of two women in an unfriendly and empty environment (cf. Carmody 1988:32-37; Gallares 1992:77-111; Weems 1988:23-24; Tribble 1978:166-199). It may be read as a story which portrays independence on the part of Ruth (cf. Nadar 2001:159-175; Masenya 2009:126-150). This story may also be read as a revelation of God's faithfulness as it is revealed in human actions (cf. Sakenfeld 1999; Masenya 2004c:86-91); or as the story in which the exercise of faithfulness is done for mixed reasons in a world which is compromised (cf. Fewell & Gunn 1989:54). The Book of Ruth may be read through the African cultural lens to reveal the points of resemblance between the events portrayed in the story and those comparable events which occur within African cultures (cf. Kanyoro 2002:33-57; Masenya 1998:81-90). The Scroll was read as a story in which women reveal their inherent power to fight poverty and/or emptiness in their lives (cf. Masenya 2004b:46-59); as a story of a woman who suffers on account of her socioeconomic plight (Sakenfeld 2002); and as a tale of women who have been abducted into marriage (Gafney 2010:250-252). The Book was read as a story of a woman who remains a perpetual foreigner and a model of the minority (Yee 2009:119-140). Whatever reading the readers produce as an end product, the thing that remains clear is that the two female characters, whose story the narrator allows the readers to hear (cf. Orpah's erasure even before the story can begin to take shape), are used as a means towards a particular end. This story is not essentially about women; it is not *their* story. It is not meant to celebrate their courage, neither is it meant to present a revelation about the plight of widows at that time. As I see it, it is a story which seeks to show God's faithfulness to Israel by providing a son who would serve as an important link for the Davidic dynasty. In order to bring this to pass through the use of narrative techniques, the narrator (he) uses characters by foregrounding some and erasing others, giving them just enough space to drive a certain point home. In addition, he is informed by a particular worldview and particular ideologies. As he does this, he enables the modern readers of the story not only to get a glimpse into the world of the text's production, but also into what worthy womanhood in that world entailed.

Notwithstanding all these challenges, one can venture to read against the grain of the text. Before our reading though, the reader will hopefully benefit from a brief analysis of what worthy womanhood is from the viewpoint of the cultures of Africa.¹

¹ The broad and generalised word "Africa", wherever it appears in this sense in the text, is meant to underscore the many points of similarity between different African ethnic groups on the continent. Indeed a look at proverbs from different African contexts on the continent will reveal striking similarities regarding the definitions of worthy (ideal) womanhood.

The African 'ēšet ḥayil

In our attempt to form a picture of what a worthy woman is in the African cultures, the present section analyses some of the African proverbs and sayings on the main qualities of a worthy woman.

Every culture has its own definitions of what a worthy woman is. These definitions include society's expectations concerning the roles which women are expected to play in order to qualify as worthy women in their communities. In our attempt to answer this question it will be worthwhile to revisit Mbiti's quotation which is cited at the beginning of this article:

To die without getting married and without children is to be completely cut off from the human community... to become an outcast and to lose all links with mankind (sic). Everybody therefore must get married and bear children: that is the greatest hope of the individual for himself (sic) and of the community for the individual (Mbiti 1989:131).

According to Mbiti then, the goal of every adult life in the African traditional setting,² be it that of a man or that of a woman, is (heterosexual) marriage and child-bearing. A bachelor, and a childless one at that, was and still is as equally scorned in African cultures as a spinster was, and still is. Patriarchy affords a bachelor an added advantage over a spinster in that only he can/is expected to initiate a marriage proposal. A woman who aspires to marriage in such a setting is thus expected to wait passively for such a proposal. In the case of the members of the younger generation though, such passivity is no

² The phrase "African traditional setting" as it is used in this article is meant to refer to the *typical* African setting. The pre-colonial family setting would fit perfectly into this definition. However, noteworthy is the fact that even today, in many an African rural setting (and even in urban contexts), such definitions of womanhood (manhood) are still firmly entrenched. The use of the phrase is not meant to give an impression that African cultures are static. However, it is disturbing to note that if there is an area in which African peoples, particularly the menfolk, choose to continue to cling tenaciously to the expectations of African cultures even if such are death-dealing to the other (e.g. the womenfolk), it is the area of relations between men and women (i.e. gender equality). One then wonders whether African women theologians were supposed to take seriously the exhortation by African male theologians that "First things should be first"! It must be acknowledged with gratitude that persons of Professor Maimela's calibre, one of the few male theologians of his time, already then dared to include the gender dynamic in their theological discourse. Elsewhere I have argued:

"It is encouraging to note that some black male theologians also see the need for this new (female) black perspective. This affirmation is in solidarity with their black sisters in order to fight '... the conflictual character of human history and the reality of confrontations among human beings, be they of class, race, or sex ...' (Maimela 1986:101-112). These issues raised by Maimela are vital ones which traditional theology avoids (Masenya 1996:62).

longer entertained. Although much of what is being discussed in this text about womanhood may be dubbed by some as dated, it is noteworthy to observe that (from the daily praxis of the people) deep in the subconscious minds of many African people (whether young or old), these notions of womanhood still prevail. It is no wonder that many still persevere through abusive marriages and/or partnerships. However, the increasing rate of divorce among younger adults can also be accounted for by young women's resistance to some of these problematic definitions of womanhood.

Similarly, within the context of monogamous heterosexual marriages, widowers unlike widows can remarry easily after their wives' deaths. This is a hard exercise for widows who, in some cases, are not expected to remarry outside the household of the deceased husband. We will return to this observation later in the text.

Even in the case of childless marriages men are usually at an advantage compared to women as the latter are the immediate suspects should there be no children from a particular marriage bond. Even if children were to be born, a new woman would be expected to go through certain "cleansing" rituals towards her "restoration" after the desired, yet feared, birthing process. In this sense Oduyoye (1992:22) rightly argues that African traditional religions, coupled with certain interpretations of some Old Testament Levitical laws, frequently contribute to the plight of these new mothers.

Consequently it is argued in this article that although heterosexual marriage is desired, even to the extent of being idolised (cf. Masenya 2007:43-56), in our African settings it is not without its own challenges.

The existence of different types of marriage within various African contexts, such as polygyny, monogamy, levirate marriage and marriage to a "family" (*ngwetši ya lapa*) in certain South African settings, reinforces the societal expectation of heterosexual marriage as a norm in our cultures. The following proverbs throw light on the expectation that women should marry. Worthy or ideal womanhood was and still is, therefore, defined mainly in terms of a woman's attachment to a man within a heterosexual marriage bond. The following proverbs serve as cases in point:

Marry your daughter when you can, your son when you please
(Jamaican proverb; Oduyoye 1995:67).

A woman who had lost her good character lamented that she was not destined to have a husband (Yoruba proverb; Oduyoye 1995:69).

A woman's grave belongs to her husband's home village
(South African Northern Sotho proverb).

As noted previously, once married, a woman is expected to remain in marriage. Oduyoye says:

The language of marriage proverbs indicates that a wife only reflects the stage of the marriage and a man's competence as a husband ... *Society demands that she stay married, because a woman has no dignity outside marriage* (Oduyoye 1995:68).

The above Yoruba proverb about the woman who is designated as having lost character throws light on the societal expectations regarding girl-children. Commenting on the same proverb, Oduyoye (1995:69) remarks: "The implication is obvious: no woman is destined to stay single. If a girl proves wayward or shows signs of being flirtatious, she is married off as quietly and as quickly as possible."

From the preceding quotation it becomes clear that according to Oduyoye one of the qualities of worthy womanhood in our African cultures (cf. the Yoruba culture in this case) is that of being attached to a man within a heterosexual marriage relationship.

The following Northern Sotho proverbs endorse Oduyoye's preceding assertion:

- (1) *Mosadi ke tšhwene, o lewa mabogo*: "A woman is a baboon, her hands are eaten" whose tenor is: The beauty and delight that a woman can cause are revealed by her diligence in fulfilling her (domestic) duties and also taking care of her husband (Masenya 2004:133).
- (2) *Monna ke peu, ga a swarwe manenolo*: "A woman should honour her husband" (Ziervogel & Mokgokong 1975:856).
- (3) *Tšhilo le lwala re tšere, le tlo šala le eja lewana*: "The diligent girl is now married." The meaning of the proverb is as follows: Once a girl (*kgadi*) gets married, her family finds it difficult to cope with household chores, while her in-laws (*ba bogadi*) become proud and grateful that their domestic chores will be attended to. The mentality of female hard work (also within the context of marriage (cf. proverb (1) above), is also revealed in this proverb.
- (4) *Mosadi ke theko ya marumo, re foša kgole*: "A woman is a gun sight, we throw her far." The underlying meaning of the proverb is as follows: We may not know where a virgin girl (*kgarebe*) may be married; we may think that she will marry in the neighbourhood only to

find that she is married to people who are far away from her home (Masenya 2004:133-134).

From the tenors of the preceding proverbs, it has hopefully become clear to the reader that in the Northern Sotho culture (like in any other African cultures), the worthiness of a woman is revealed by, among others, her marital status. The latter in patriarchally oriented cultures is geared mostly towards the enhancement of male interests and the meeting of male needs.

As the following related proverb forms the main hermeneutical lens for our re-reading of the text of Ruth, it will now receive a more detailed analysis:

Lebitla la mosadi ke bogadi (A (married) woman's grave belongs to her husband's home village).

The tone of the preceding proverb reveals that once a husband dies a widow is neither expected to return to her father's household nor to make an independent decision to remarry. As marriage is communal in African contexts (cf. also the Book of Ruth), the widow will naturally expect her husband's family to take care of all her needs after his death. A levirate marriage usually becomes the widow's option.

The Northern Sotho word *mosadi*, which is translated as "woman", simply means "woman" irrespective of a woman's marital status. However, as the examples in the preceding paragraphs have shown, African communities expected (and still expect) women to be heterosexually married. It is no wonder that the implication of the preceding proverb is that the grave of *mosadi* (i.e. every woman) will be found at her husband's home village. Of interest is the observation that in the Northern Sotho language, the proverb does not read: The grave of a *married* woman (*mosadi*) is at her husband's place. It reads: The grave of a woman (*mosadi*) belongs to her husband's home. The implication is clear: Every *mosadi* (woman) must have a husband, remain in the marriage (i.e. whether it is abusive or not) until the two (in the case of a monogamous marriage) are separated by death. Her burial, irrespective of whether she predeceases her spouse or not, must occur at the husband's place!

Another related Northern Sotho saying is worth considering: *Lebitla ga le hlalwe* ("A [man's] grave cannot be divorced"). The mood of this proverb is similar to that of the preceding proverb. Just like the preceding proverb, at face value the proverb might appear inclusive. However, once the proverb is uttered, even if there is no specificity about which grave is to be divorced, thus sending a false message about inclusiveness, the listeners/readers who are conversant with African cultures will know that the grave in question cannot be that of a woman. It is very definitely the grave of

a man. After his death (in case she dies before her husband (cf. the case of Ruth)), the widow is expected to remain with his family until her death. Her grave must ultimately be found at her husband's home village.

The information in the above paragraphs has hopefully shed light on the expectation in African communities as regards women and marriage. Although both women and men would naturally benefit from the marriage, the underlying patriarchal notions of a girl-child who is to be "saved" through marriage, a woman as a servant of her husband and his people, a woman as the one who carries the patri-lineage (cf. the proverbs on women as mothers below), and a woman who is not supposed to "divorce" her husband's grave become clear from these proverbs. As can be expected, in family-oriented cultures like those in Africa, marriage was/is supposed to culminate, as is the case in the Book of Ruth, in the birth of (a) child(ren), particularly a boy-child(ren). Mbiti's quotation above comes to mind here:

Everybody therefore must get married and bear children: that is the greatest hope of the individual for himself and of the community for the individual (Mbiti 1989:131).

There are many proverbs which highlight the role of women as mothers. A few examples will suffice in this regard:

Relevant Northern Sotho proverbs regarding the significance of women as mothers are listed below:

- (1) *Go tswala ke go feka maano*: "To give birth is to devise plans." The proverb means that it is worthwhile to have one's own children for these will take care of one's needs during old age.
- (2) *A ba tswalwe ba ate gobane mo-na-le-pelo ga a tsebjwe*: "Let them be birthed and let them increase for the one with a lone heart is not known." Its tenor is: Women should bear as many children as possible as some of these may grow up to be good adults who would be able to take care of the needs of their parents among others.
- (3) *Mosadi a hlaletša ngwana bolwetši bo a fola*: "Once a woman rocks a child, her illness gets healed." The proverb means that once a woman delivers a child, she becomes very excited, even to the extent of forgetting about her troubles (cf. Masenya 2004:129-134).
- (4) *Mmago ngwana o swara thipa ka bogaleng*. This translates as: "A mother holds the knife by its cutting edge."

The tenor of the preceding proverb reveals that it is a mother who will go out of her way, even taking risks at times, for the safety and welfare of her children. The Akan counterparts of the preceding proverb are worth noting:

“A hen might step on her chick, but not with the intention of killing it.”

“When you catch the mother hen, the chicks become easy prey.”

“The tortoise has no breasts and yet feeds her young ones” (Akan: Oduyoye 1995:59).

The Akan saying *Ena yie* means “motherhood is supreme” (Masenya 1996:166).

Akintunde (2006:158) confirms our assertion of the important role placed on women as mothers in the African cultures when she says:

As in Akan culture, Yoruba culture places the welfare of children and the home above everything else. This is true of other African clans. It was an attribute that was exhibited in the past as well as within contemporary African society. Nothing else takes precedence. Hence the proverb, “When one mother or child lies dying, one does not pursue disputes” (Oduyoye 1995:60).

Although the preceding list is not exhaustive, these proverbs show that married women in the African cultures were and still are expected to prove their worthiness as women by bearing children in their families. Boy-children are particularly preferred to ensure the continuance of the male lineage. Our investigation of worthy womanhood from an African proverbial viewpoint enables us to conclude the following:

The basic determinant of worthy (ideal) womanhood in African cultures is a woman's capacity to be a wife (whether in a monogamous or polygynous marriage relationship) and a mother.

Other qualities expected of women, such as hard work (including commitment to household chores even if they are career women) and the nurturing of

children (cf. Masenya 2004:128-140), cannot be covered within the scope of this article. The preceding proverbs hopefully put the reader in a better position to engage in the words of Boaz to Ruth. Before we turn to the biblical text, it should be noted that although the preceding patriarchal African understanding of worthy womanhood served and continues to serve the interests of African communities (including those of women and girl-children), it is in my view restrictive, and thus not always affirming to those women who seek to define the notion of womanhood from outside the confines of the preceding two categories. A word of caution is thus in order at this stage.

Tampering with women's female identities: an exercise in wisdom or not?

The significance and persistence of the preceding two basic traditional roles for women in Africa cannot be questioned. Neither can we dispute the observation that many women in our communities still willingly choose to be wives and mothers as they feel empowered by these roles. It becomes problematic and unwise though if these roles continue to be absolutised, even to the extent of being idolised! It is probable that the high divorce rates as well as the prevalence of passion killings among young and middle-aged married adults are due to the persistence of the male partners to hold on to such dogmatic definitions of womanhood. Our evaluation of what worthy womanhood is or should be is bound to be flawed if these two roles are the only ones deemed important to qualify persons for worthy womanhood. Such an inconsistent mentality will encourage our communities, including the members of our communities of faith, to continue to denigrate those women who choose to exercise their *bosadi* independent of any partner (whether male or female). Equally, female same-gender couples cannot be accommodated within such a definition of worthy womanhood. Informed by such a one-sided mentality, married men, who are not polygynists, will find it easy to divorce women when the marriage becomes childless. Important questions at this point are: What if it is the man who is responsible for the childlessness in the marriage? What if it is within the design of the "sacred other" for that particular family in order to enable it to carry out its mission to the many orphans in our environs?

If we particularly seek to be guided by God's will for the lives of women and men, our view of what ideal womanhood is should be informed by our willingness to affirm all men and women (whether married or single) for what they were first and foremost designed to be. We might be shocked, particularly if we had hoped that our definitions of worthy womanhood were inspired by God's spirit within us, to discover that we misunderstood God's design for each individual woman's life.

With the preceding short background to the basic qualities of the (traditional) African woman of worth, we now take a look at the text of Ruth even in our efforts to interrogate Boaz's words to Ruth as the *'ēšet ḥayil*.

Ruth, the *'ēšet ḥayil*?

And now, my daughter, do not be afraid, I will do for you all that you ask, for all the assembly of my people know that you are a worthy woman (*'ēšet ḥayil*; Ruth 3:11).

Boaz's praises to Ruth form part of their conversation in the night at the threshing floor (Ruth 3:6-13). After pronouncing the blessing of YHWH (Yahweh) upon Ruth and lauding Ruth for not having pursued younger men, Boaz informed Ruth that all the (male) assembly of his people (cf. an echo to the "elders of the land" in Proverbs 31:23 and "the city gates" in Proverbs 31:31) knew that she was the *'ēšet ḥayil* (a worthy woman; cf. the "woman of worth" lauded in Proverbs 31:10-31).

A brief word about the Hebrew phrase *'ēšet ḥayil*, translated as "woman of worth", is in order at this stage:

The Hebrew word *ḥayil* is a term usually applied to men in the phrase which is usually translated as *'iš ḥayil*. The latter phrase denotes persons at the height of their powers and capacities. The word *ḥayil*, as applied to women, is used only four times in the Hebrew Bible: Ruth 3:11; Proverbs 12:4; and twice in the poem of Proverbs 31:10-31 (cf. Toy 1977:243).

According to Fontaine (1992:151), the key phrase *'ēšet ḥayil*, which opens Proverbs 31:10-31, is usually translated as a "capable", "perfect" or "good" wife, literally, "a woman of worth" because the term for "woman" and "wife" is the same in Hebrew. It can be argued that, just like in African cultures, every Israelite adult woman/*'iššah* was expected to be married. It is no wonder that, as we will later observe, the two female husbandless characters in the Book of Ruth sought marriage at all costs. This usage of the Hebrew words *'iššah* to refer to both woman and wife reminds us of the word *mosadi* (woman) in the Northern Sotho African South African culture and how its usage in some proverbs equated every *mosadi* with a married woman!

It was at the threshing floor that Boaz, a rich Judahite man, reveals to Ruth for the first time (at least from the narrator's point of view) that his community of men has bestowed on Ruth, the Moabite (foreign) widow, this rare phrase from the Old Testament. All of them, Boaz asserts, know that Ruth is the *'ēšet ḥayil*. An important question we seek to address in this section is: What in particular did Ruth do that qualified her to be designated as a woman of substance?

Sakenfeld (1999:62) contends that so far in the narration, Ruth (though at that point she is neither wealthy, married nor with children) displays the qualities of *'ēšet ḥayil* as are notable in the woman of worth as described in Proverbs 31:10-31: the overall theme of woman as household manager, taking initiative both inside and outside the household to provide for her family is remarkably appropriate to the Ruth portrayed in the Book so far. She does good and not harm (cf. Proverbs 31:12), “provides food for the household” (Proverbs 31:15), “does not eat the bread of idleness” (Proverbs 31:27), and so on. Sakenfeld (1999:62) further asserts:

It is equally important to emphasize that so many key traits of a “worthy woman” are recognizable in Ruth quite apart from the context of marriage, children and wealth presupposed in Proverbs 31. *Her story thus serves as a balance and corrective to any cultural assumption that only married women are truly worthy.*

Though at face value, and particularly when the events which Sakenfeld comments on in the above paragraph are interpreted outside the context of the whole story, one would tend to agree with her on the possibility of the story serving as a corrective to cultures which affirm women as worthy only when married, a closer look at the story reveals otherwise. Even if one were to choose to remove marriage from the equation and affirm the “worthiness” of Ruth outside of marriage at this stage of the narration, the following observations in my view make Sakenfeld’s assertion a little dubious:

- (1) The pronouncement made by Boaz to Ruth as being the “*'ēšet ḥayil*” (cf. 3:11) is made only after Ruth had proposed marriage to Boaz (cf. Ruth 3:9). If Boaz was affirmative of such a rare designation about Ruth (from his male assembly) outside the confines of marriage, why did he not pronounce it to Ruth before the threshing floor scene? Why did he have to pronounce it then? In all probability, there is more to this than meets the reader’s eye.
- (2) Also, modern readers of the story (i.e. when we read in retrospect) know that Ruth eventually marries and bears a son (Ruth 4).

One would thus then not be reading too much into the text to assume that the designation of Ruth as the *'ēšet ḥayil* is in one way or another linked to her (potential/prospective) marital status. Before we engage the main beneficiary at the scene of the threshing floor described in Ruth 3, the reader might benefit from a brief interrogation of the dynamics of language in a conversation of unequal conversation partners (cf. Ruth and Boaz in this specific case).

Interrogating the language of the powerful

In a context where one's identities were mainly shaped by the intricate power dynamics prevalent in one's social location (cf. South African context), one had to learn the power dynamics inherent in the use of language. A person had to learn to interrogate the discourse of those in power particularly when it was directed to the powerless. A person's context was shaped mostly by racial power dynamics. An example will suffice in this regard: in apartheid South Africa (even today to an extent) if a white male person were to laud a black woman for being a good Christian, that woman would have done well to interrogate what was *actually* meant by that.

Similarly, the prevalence of gender inequalities in our African contexts necessitates that African women interrogate male definitions of worthy womanhood (cf. such definitions as are reflected in the African proverbs above) to see if they are indeed affirming. Kanyoro (2002:36) asserts the following:

African theologians who subscribe to the theology of enculturation would turn to wholeheartedly affirming cultural issues in Ruth. They applaud Ruth for her faithfulness to her mother-in-law and they consider it normal that Elimelech's relative, Boaz, should care for Naomi and Ruth. They justify the levirate marriage and use the text to enforce widow inheritance, the African form of levirate marriage. *They glorify the fact that Ruth gives birth to a son and it is almost seen as the emblem of her true womanhood* and the key to her acceptance in a foreign land among the family of her dead husband. They pronounce all cultural practices in Ruth as normal and good, and recommend them for emulation by African women.

In my view those African women who seek to embrace the positive elements of the African cultures such as the African corporeal mentality will still challenge those elements of corporeality which bring discord to women's lives. Isn't it the "sore" caused by patriarchy, misogyny and violence against women and girl-children which "itches to its owner"? With these sensitivities in mind, we now approach the words of Boaz, the *'iš gibbor ḥayil*, an insider to the Israelite traditions, to the poor, Moabite widow, as we continue to grapple with the question: Is Ruth the *'ēšet ḥayil* for real?

(Re)defining womanhood from the threshing floor

The readers who have an interest in the narrative of Ruth, particularly in terms of the light which it throws on definitions of womanhood, will do well

not only to read the whole book, but in particular the preceding chapter (cf. Ruth 2:1-16) in close conjunction with chapter 3. In my view, Boaz's first encounter with Ruth in chapter 2 prepares fertile ground for the activities that would later occur at the threshing floor: activities which will throw light on what worthy womanhood was according to the male viewpoint of the time; a view which if absolutised is as problematic as the traditional African view which was revealed from the proverbs discussed in this text.

From our reading of Naomi's earlier commitment to seek security through marriage for Ruth and Orpah (cf. Ruth 1:6-14) and for Ruth (implicitly in 2:20), and from reading Ruth 3:1, the reader may not be so surprised by her advice to Ruth to "... wash and anoint yourself (herself) and put on your best clothes and go down to the threshing floor ..." (Ruth 3:3).

Viewed through the African proverbial lens, such a commitment on the part of a mother-in-law would make sense as part of her commitment to all the needs of the younger widow, her daughter-in-law who understood that her grave was eventually supposed to be located at the home village of Naomi's son. What would, however, not make sense in these African contexts is Naomi's "individualised" rather than a "communal/family" move towards such an endeavour. How could Naomi, an old woman conversant with the separate Israelite gendered spaces (cf. also those of Africa), advise a young woman to visit a male space in the night? May Say Pa's (2006:54) comments about the risks connected to harvest time and the threshing floor are worth noting:

It (harvest time) was a time when young men and women, under cover of darkness, could engage in sexual acts. Night-time was the time for lovers' trysts ... The threshing floor itself was a dangerous place. It was used not only for agricultural purposes but also for sexual licentiousness of the fertility cult. For instance, Hosea (9:1b) warns Israel not to rejoice ... For you have played the whore, departing from your God. You have loved a prostitute's pay on all threshing floors.

Naomi advised Ruth to "dress up", anoint herself and go to the threshing floor. Ruth had to wait until Boaz had eaten and drunk, then watch where he was sleeping, "When he lies down, observe the place where he lies; then, go and uncover his feet and lie down; and he will tell you what to do" (Ruth 3:6). Naomi's advice to her daughter to go to the threshing floor and uncover the feet of Boaz is disturbing.

In a world in which the value of women's bodies was connected with their marital status, was it wise for an elderly woman to advise a younger woman to "visit" a drunk man in the night and lie next to him? In a world in which the bodies of single (husbandless) women were viewed as easy prey

for sex – even by married men – how should modern-day African Bible readers view Naomi’s advice?

In chapter 2, the *’iš gibbor ḥayil* of our investigation, conversant with the vulnerability of single women’s bodies in his context, reminds his male reapers not to bother Ruth (2:9). In the Hebrew text, the word “bother”, when used in the textual context in which the object of the act of bothering is a female person, implies sexual molestation. Earlier on, even Naomi had advised Ruth to stay with Boaz’s young women as she might be “... bothered in another field” (2:23). It would appear though that in her relentless efforts to seek marriage/security for Ruth at all costs, Naomi did not “bother” if her daughter-in-law were to be bothered by Boaz!

Other questions worth asking are: If Ruth was not a Moabite, that is if Ruth was an insider to the traditions of Israel in terms of ethnicity, would Naomi, as well as the Judahite narrator of this story, have presented such a problematic scene? Could it be that Ruth is being sexualised on account of the problematic history between the Moabites and the Israelites? Gafney’s (2010:251) remarks in this regard are worth considering:

The very name “Moab”, literally “from [my] father”, evokes the alleged incestuous and therefore despicable nature of all Moabites according to the Israelite account of their origins in the Genesis 19 account of Lot and his daughters. As a result, Moabites, particularly Moabite women, are highly sexualized in the scriptures of Israel, as are many contemporary African women readers of those same scriptures.

The views of those commentators who argue that the events which occur at the threshing floor are full of ambiguities are valid when the following observations are considered:

- The narrator employs language which is highly suggestive of a sexual encounter between Boaz and Ruth, although the reader is basically left unclear concerning an actual encounter. As readers we could be persuaded by the following examples in favour of the possibility of the sexual encounter: (a) In 3:3, Ruth’s dressing up and anointing with perfumes point in that direction; the verb “to lie” is used repeatedly (3:4; 7,8,13): our speculations are heightened by an observation that the older man involved had already revealed a possible vested interest in Ruth earlier on (cf. 2:8-9; 14-16); (b) the Hebrew word *margelot*, translated as feet (in uncovering the feet of Boaz, 3:7), is used in some texts as a euphemism for male genitals.
- The plot of the story has so far allowed readers to get a glimpse of Naomi’s/the narrator’s basic portrayal of worthy womanhood as that

of a woman heterosexually married. Also the words "... spread your cloak over your servant, for you are a next-of-kin" (Ruth 3:9) by Ruth, indicate Ruth's proposal of marriage to Boaz (cf. Beattie 1978:43; Sakenfeld 1999:55-56; 58). Within an African traditional setting of levirate marriage, Ruth's request to a man who was not her deceased's husband's brother would not quite fit: the goel, translated as "next-of-kin" in some Bible translations, had no connections with marital obligations towards widows. Sakenfeld (1999:59) remarks in this regard are significant:

The term "goel" is a legal one, but it is highly charged socially because it focuses on the preservation of family and community. And yet there is a glaring gap between the appearance of the word goel associated with rights and responsibilities pertaining to marriage. The regulation having to do with rights and responsibilities in cases where a man is to marry his brother's widow to perpetuate the family line is the law of levirate marriage ... but the levirate provisions contain no reference to the goel. Only in the Book of Ruth do the two spheres of marriage among kin and land redemption among kin come together.

In 3:8, Boaz is said to be startled by a woman who lay at his feet. It is worth mentioning that although Boaz continues to call Ruth his daughter (Babe?) even in this episode, his question to Ruth seems to fit the occasion this time. The question has changed from, "To whom does this young woman belong?" (Ruth 2:5) to "Who are you?" (Ruth 3:8). Previously, Boaz wished to know if Ruth was still under the authority of her father or her husband. Now that Ruth has played according to the rules of patriarchy in terms of its definition of worthy womanhood, availed herself as a marriage candidate to an older man and availed her body to him rather than to younger men Boaz's question, "Who are you?", fits the occasion!

Boaz's sudden change from being startled to the proclamation of Yahweh's blessings upon Ruth is significant, followed by the promise that he would cater for all that she had asked for (in essence accepting her marriage proposal), to the revelation that all the assembly of his people know that she is the *'ēšet ḥayil*. Why is Boaz so excited? We may well ask why he is not angry that he has been shamed? In a world in which human relations were shaped among others by the notions of shame and honour, Boaz, a rich, old man from an "inside" ethnic group, could naturally have been angered by the boldness of a young, poor, foreign, and particularly a Moabite widow to dare not only to lie with him, but also to propose marriage to him! His warning in 3:14 that a female's night visit to the threshing floor was supposed to be kept secret reveals something of this shame. Worthy of note here is also the change in Boaz's designation of Ruth in 3:14; no longer is Ruth called his

“daughter” but a woman (*iššah*), and no ordinary woman, but a woman of substance, the *'ēšet ḥayil!*

If Ruth's loyalty to Boaz that night is said to surpass the previous one (her loyalty to Naomi) because “... you (she) have (has) not gone after young men, whether poor or rich” (3:11), how may readers understand his praising of Ruth on account of her loyalty to her mother-in-law in 2:11-12? What if Boaz's words in 3:10 were to be read in the light of the words in 2:11-12 with the speculation that, already seen in chapter 2, the interest shown and the praises sang to Ruth were not motivated more by what Ruth had done for her mother-in-law but by the anticipation of what she would do for him in future, that is when he would allow Yahweh to use him to spread his wings or cloak upon her (cf. 2:12)?

Boaz's response to Ruth's “problematic” moves at the threshing floor excited him so much as to cause him to agree with “the assembly of his people” that Ruth is the “woman of worth”! We continue to ask: Is Ruth, the *'ēšet ḥayil*, for real? As the reader continues to ask the latter question in her/his search for affirming definitions of womanhood (*bosadi*) in Africa, the reader certainly knows that Ruth, the married woman, has succeeded in providing the desired heir to her deceased husband's lineage. Hence forward her whereabouts remain unknown to the reader as she disappears from the narrative. The reader can, however, informed by the key African proverb in this text reliably speculate that Ruth's grave would be located somewhere at her (deceased) husband's home village.

Conclusion

The preceding discussion has hopefully revealed that definitions of womanhood, as prescribed by African proverbs as well as the text of Ruth 3, are restrictive and thus not *always* affirming to those women who choose to define the worthiness of their womanhood outside of the categories of heterosexual marriage, child-bearing and child-rearing. It makes sense, though it is not acceptable, that on account of the patriarchal nature of the post-colonial, post-independence, post-apartheid African contexts in which we are located, such definitions continue to be entrenched. They continue to reign supreme in our families and in our ecclesiastical settings, also sanctioned through the employ of texts such as the Book of Ruth as being God-ordained!

In these contexts, where marriage (in all its various forms) continues to be regarded as the main determinant of worthy womanhood, even in circumstances in which many an African woman is made to persevere in an abusive marriage relationship; even where women continue to avail their bodies to men willingly or unwillingly for socioeconomic survival; even in contexts typified by violence committed against female bodies, in which the trafficking for sex of women and girl-children from poor countries to rich

countries continues to be the order of the day, the question, “Is Ruth, the *'ēšet ḥayil*, for real?”, remains a critical question to be asked by all of us. The highly regarded Professor Simon Maimela will be concerned that even after many years of the political liberation they all fought for, the young crop of black South African theologians must, in the midst of patriarchy, still grapple with questions regarding the empowerment of women. The question, “Is Ruth, the *'ēšet ḥayil*, for real?”, still remains a pressing question to be asked and answered appropriately (as we have hopefully done in this article) by all those who are concerned about the welfare of the historically marginalised even as we all continue to seek and construct affirming, life-enhancing definitions of what it means to be a worthy woman in our African contexts. It is thus an honour for me to dedicate this piece to Professor Maimela, the scholar of substance (*ḥayil*), as we continue with our search for the affirmation of all people.

*O ile go koma liberation theology Sekomane, wa re šuela Noko,
e le go re fa mohlala, go-re le rena re tile re kome,
HLABIRWA!*

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