

# The end of essentialist gods and *Ubuntu*: a feminist critical investigation

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## Abstract

The focus on god and Ubuntu constructs affirms the fact that people are natural social constructivists involved in a continuous process of conceptualising ideas that give meaning to their contexts. The juxtaposing of these two constructs extends what is known of new god ideas to that of Ubuntu or African 'humanness.' Whereas ideology criticism served as the broad overarching hermeneutical tool for this study, feminism was used as the specific interpretative framework to critically scrutinise mostly patriarchally biased conceptualisations of god and Ubuntu. In contrast to Western feminism, African womanism, with its emphasis on African Motherhood/Womanhood, contributed to a much needed contextual and culturally sensitive analysis of Ubuntu in particular. It was concluded that there are various god and Ubuntu constructs and that it is no longer tenable to claim a single (dogmatic/essentialist) god or a single (dogmatic) Ubuntu to structure reality meaningfully. 'Truth' lives only momentarily as history continues to unfold and people find new ways in their search for meaning.

**Keywords:** God, *Ubuntu*, ideology, feminism, African womanism

## Introduction

*Ubuntu* or the African worldview of 'humanness' has almost become an axiom the past few decades for its usefulness in a variety of domains. Within politics it was included in the preamble of the 1993 interim constitution of South Africa, although later excluded in the preamble of the 1996 Constitution. It was often heard at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) hearings under the leadership of Archbishop Desmond Tutu to promote forgiveness and reconciliation,<sup>2</sup> and has since become the 'vision and mission' of several government departments. In academic circles it has been embraced by moral philosophers (e.g. Metz, 2012), the judiciary (e.g. Cornell, 2011; Mokgoro, 2012) and in management studies (Broodryk, 2005; Mbigi, 1997), to name but a few. Churches preach its message and lay people of diverse walks of life commit themselves to live its ethos on a daily basis, markedly in socio-economic relationships as they live the *Ubuntu* values of sharing and caring through the phenomenon of *mogodisano/stokvel* (a round robin system to provide financial assistance to members; Townsen & Mosala, 2008:1). *Ubuntu*, however, has not only been praised but also resisted. Sceptics of *Ubuntu* criticises *Ubuntu* for being vague, anti-individual, a pre-scientific tribal or clan system and consider *Ubuntu* irrelevant for modern society (Horsthemke, 2005; Marx 2002; Mdhuli-Mdhluli, 1987). Related to these criticisms, and supporting them, is Van Binsbergen's scathing attack. He argues that *Ubuntu* is a creation of some African elites (academics) similar to other utopian ideas like African Socialism, African Communalism and Consciencism (Van Binsbergen, 2001:57, 72). Adding another critical voice is this contribution's questioning of which *Ubuntu* to embrace? Is there only one (essentialist) *Ubuntu* or are there perhaps some variants/versions of which the one may be more attractive than the other? The latter question is raised especially with the position of women in mind. Is *Ubuntu* in general really women-friendly, or are some versions discriminating against the so-called 'lesser ones' (women, children, etc.) of society? These questions are raised in a similar vein as the question about 'god' and how god constructs differ in being gender-inclusive (or not).

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<sup>2</sup> Van Binsbergen, however, argues that *Ubuntu* became a tool of the ruling class to manipulate and oppress their fellow Africans as they emphasised and promoted forgiveness and reconciliation. This application did not benefit the victims of apartheid and the actions of the perpetrators of apartheid were swept under the carpet (2001:75-77).

The questions just raised place one methodologically in the midst of ideology criticism, the critical engagement with ideologies<sup>3</sup> and their underlying values. People are by nature social-constructivists and constantly in the process of 'world-making.' This points to the human capacity (and the cultural imperative) to constantly symbolise, to create symbolic worlds within which to live. These conceptual worlds are 'populated,' so to speak, with their deepest convictions or ideologies. The latter can also be similarly described as meaningful discourses, hegemonies, master narratives, traditions, canons or world-views (Lincoln, 2000:409; Mack, 2000:291). *Ubuntu* is such a (African) worldview that requires of its adherents to live the *Ubuntu* way of life of cherishing strong communal ties, respect for another, sharing and caring, subscribing to a divine world and so on. But what has this to do with 'god,' seeing that this question has been asked in similar vein above in regard to gender? 'God,' usually the ultimate focal point of religion, also functions as an 'ideology,' as the carrier of a society's deepest convictions. 'God' amongst many things, can also be described as the projection of our deepest values, a horizon to live up to and to meaningfully shape and structure our reality.<sup>4</sup> In this regard Lease (2000:445) verbalises succinctly: 'Not every ideology is a religion, but every religion is ideology.' And to reiterate again that *Ubuntu* is a tradition/worldview/ideology that reminds of religion, Boyer (2001:261-262) points out that notions like 'lineage,' 'tradition,' 'community' or 'society,' et cetera, often function in a similar manner as supernatural agents do in diverse religions. It therefore becomes meaningful to juxtapose the notion of 'god' with that of *Ubuntu* to analyse both for their capacity for the formation and upholding of a society. And the important further question asked, is there only one such an ideological (essential/dogmatic) construct or are there several, serving the needs of changing societies?

It is especially in regard to the changing needs of societies that feminist critique has alerted us. Feminists, with their epistemology of 'the female experience,' have been at the forefront of exposing gender discriminating ideological constructs, markedly so in religions where the hegemony of patriarchy is more than often rife. The patriarchal god became the most favourite and widespread god throughout the ages and undeniably oppressive of and inhibiting for women. It is understandable that many women today are actively engaged in constructing goddesses or some ultimate feminist 'idea' that allows them freedom of expression and fulfilment as women. The same applies to the 'idea' of *Ubuntu*. Feminists have argued in similar vein that an uncritical acceptance of especially a traditional version of *Ubuntu*, in fact strengthens patriarchy and keeps women subdued. Feminism, however, is varied and does not represent a homogenous voice. There are radicalists that for instance reject capitalism, imperialism and religion<sup>5</sup> altogether, regarding its embedded patriarchy as unredeemable (Krolokke, 2005:8-11); there are reformed voices that hope to reform their religions creatively from within, to be more women-friendly (e.g. Schüssler-Fiorenza, 1984); there are Westerners and voices from the Third World, the latter rejecting the complacency of the First World and not able to grasp the often dire experiences of third-world inhabitants (e.g. Hudson-Weems, 1997). In what follows attention will be paid especially to African feminism/womanism in its endeavour to engage critically but in solidarity with *Ubuntu*.

To recap: in order to apply these introductory comments made, a few god constructs as ideological formative forces will be highlighted and their changes to meet the changing wants of societies, especially those laid bare by feminists. The juxtaposing of *Ubuntu* constructs with

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<sup>3</sup> The definition of Robbins (1996:96 following Davis) is very appropriate for this contribution: 'An integrated system of beliefs, assumptions, and values' that reflects 'the needs and interests of a group or class at a particular time in history.'

<sup>4</sup> This is not to contain or restrict the ultimate God of our beliefs to our human thoughts, ideas and constructs, but this is the only way that we can rationally deliberate on the notion of 'god.'

<sup>5</sup> Radical Western feminists, for instance, decry patriarchal tendencies in Judaism and Christianity, believing that there is no place for the Bible and the Torah in the religious experience of women and advocate that women should leave institutional religions, because they serve as instruments to betray them (Ferguson, 1995:174-175).

god constructs that follows, extends what is known of new god ideas to that of *Ubuntu*, and here especially a reformed *Ubuntu* as initiated by African womanism.

### Diverse constructs of the god idea and feminist critique

A few glimpses from the past show how gods are being exchanged to satisfy the needs of their generating societies. The very early presence of female deities is interesting and appealing for modern feminist sentiments. Armstrong (1993:9-11) contemplates the possibility that, at the dawn of humanity, people worshipped a Supreme Deity/Sky God/High God who was perceived as creator of the world and governor of human affairs. The Sky God, however, was deemed too remote and was subsequently replaced by spirits and gods considered more accessible (Armstrong, 1993:9), among them the construction of a female deity, known as the 'Great Mother' (Armstrong, 2009:11)<sup>6</sup> in various parts of the world. Ferguson explains that the goddess was perceived as a 'divine mother,' able to give humans, animals and plants life, nourish them and receive them back into her cosmic womb (Ferguson, 1995:6, 10-11). Armstrong (1993:11) adds that the notion of a 'Mother Goddess'<sup>7</sup> was developed during the late Paleolithic age. During this period people linked agriculture, then in an early developmental stage, with the view that human life and fertility were sacred. It was believed that the female possessed an inexhaustible power of life, manifested in the ability of nature to renew itself as seen *inter alia* in the ability of the snake to renew its skin (Armstrong, 2009:11). Evidence that points to female god constructs among some ancient societies in Europe and Asia is revealed through archaeology and history of religion studies. Archaeologists discovered female figurines in burial sites and sacred places from various areas in preliterate Europe and Asia indicating the existence of goddess worship. Ferguson (1995:1) captures the essence of this goddess worship as follows:

Archaeologists and historians have uncovered evidence of goddess religions in southern Europe, in areas now occupied by France, Spain, Italy and the Balkan countries. Southern Asia—areas in present Turkey as well as Greece and the Islands of Malta and Crete—has yielded many artefacts that point to the veneration of the feminine. Even England and Ireland contain remnants of shrines and sacred places that were dedicated to goddesses.

Ferguson (1995:14-15) also points out goddess worship in Northern Africa, in Egypt (2500 BCE): Egyptians worshipped Nut, Isis, Maat and Hathot (Ferguson, 1995:14-15; Kamalu 1990:6, 47-48). The goddess Nut was associated with the sky and was portrayed encircling the sky with her body, which also represented the heaven; her arms and legs are the pillars upon which the sky rests. Her headdress is encircled by a snake which symbolises the power of regeneration through its ability to shed its old skin. Goddess worship is also observed among some African societies in the sub-Saharan region. Amadiume (1997:102), who writes from a Nigerian (West African) perspective, states that in Africa, mothers were considered sacred and held unlimited authority. This elevated view found expression in the river goddess religion where women dominated the *Igbo* societies along the *Idemili* River (Amadiume, 1997:127; Isichei, 2004:233-234). The presence of the goddess, Ala, known as the Earth Spirit, also confirms such a 'mother' construct in this society (Amadiume, 1987:182). This goddess reigned above all deities and ancestors and the python was her sacred symbol. These goddess societies were characteristically agrarian, matrilinear and matrilocal,

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<sup>6</sup> There have been many theories about the origin of religion. Yet it seems that creating gods is something that human beings have always done. When one religious idea ceases to work for them, it is simply replaced (Armstrong, 1993:10).

<sup>7</sup> The "Mother Goddess" is often embraced by feminists as she satisfies the acknowledgement of their convictions, assumptions and deepest values, embodying the sacredness of femininity and the ultimate ideal to live up to.

harmonious, marked by partnership and an absence of hierarchy. Some even reflected a degree of technical advancement (Ferguson, 1995:5-8, 22; Ruether, 2005:21).

However, some time between 4400 and 3000 BCE, the goddess societies in ancient Europe and Asia, were invaded by nomadic militarist and patriarchal-minded people from the Russian steppes (Ruether, 2005:21). The archaeological record now shows weapons such as daggers, arrowheads, battle-axes and mace-heads, discovered in graves and sacred places and reflect followers' allegiance to their (warrior) god(s) (Ferguson, 1995:28-29). A male god now becomes the ideal to live up to and society becomes largely 'a man's world,' an androcentric, patrilinear and patrilocal society, competition and power driven, and hierarchical. It is clear that a change of gods leads to a changed society and vice versa.

A few more brief glimpses from the Abrahamic (monotheistic) religions conceptualised in the so-called axial age (1500 BCE – 700 CE),<sup>8</sup> confirm that new god ideas are continuously constructed as societal groups develop new identities and needs, despite them all embracing a patriarchal version of god. A few broad, exemplary canvass strokes of such changes within the Israelite/Judaic tradition and Christianity will suffice.<sup>9</sup> El was the original God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who was later named Israel; the name Yahweh replaced the name El under the leadership of Moses (Exodus 6:2-3; Ruether, 2005:77). Later, from the early monarchy to the exile in Babylon, Yahweh worship demonstrates a convergence with the characteristics of Canaanite gods, namely El, Baal, and the female Asherah; El was a high god, an elderly, fatherly figure enthroned amid a divine council; Baal was a storm god who brings fructifying rain while Asherah was a consort of Yahweh (Ruether, 2005:74,76). One can understand the Old Testament's prophets' stark opposition during this time against tendencies of polytheism to ensure Yahweh's sovereignty.

After the Babylonian exile the latter came to full fruition. The exiles could no longer practise their temple-based religion and encountered the Babylonians' ideas of god, which credited Marduk with being the creator of the universe. This resulted in new concepts about Yahweh or newly emphasised (older) notions, namely that of rigid monotheism, founded on Israel's prophets' attack on the worship of other gods and goddesses before and during their period of exile. Yahweh was elevated as the one and only god (Armstrong, 2009:47), instrumental in establishing a new identity and future hope for the devastated exiles. Rabbinic Judaism, where the religion of Israel 'came of age' (Armstrong, 2009:80) developed another interesting notion of Yahweh, namely the Shekinah. The rabbis emphasised that the Shekinah (God's 'presence' in the temple) was the synonym of God and that his Spirit was his image; they also taught that God was present on earth (Armstrong, 1993:90; 2009:80). This teaching of an immanent God became a common spirituality, was accepted by many because it functioned well and helped those Jews living away from Jerusalem to encourage a sense of God's close presence (Armstrong, 1993:91-93). New societal needs give birth to new functional constructs of the god idea.

Pausing for a moment on the central figure of Christianity, Jesus, similar shifting constructs can be observed as they satisfy different needs. Very notable is that from Jesus himself claiming not to be god but being divinised by his followers, referred to by Armstrong as Jesus-is-god constructs. The divinity of Jesus was based on the doctrine of incarnation, which Armstrong emphasises was not a new concept. It was well-known in the Greco-roman world and interestingly known to exist among the followers of Buddha and Hinduism during the same period (Armstrong, 1993:100). This concept satisfied the desire for divine immanence,

<sup>8</sup> This time represents a high point in human history when iron technology developed, the art of writing and navigation were extended, the earliest forms of systematic thought emerged and the birth of most of the so-called world religions took place (Krüger, Lubbe & Steyn, 2009:19-20).

<sup>9</sup> See Armstrong (1993:155ff) also for her detailed discussion of changes in Islam on ultimate ideas, competing interest groups, etc.

reiterating also a similar need for constructing the Shekinah as noted above. The Jesus-is-God constructs reveal some similarities between the *bodhisattva* and the divinisation of Jesus found in the teachings of Paul during the first century CE (Armstrong, 1993:101, 104-105). The *bodhisattva* puts off his *nirvana* and sacrificed himself for others, and similarly Jesus who gave his life for others. Both became mediators between humanity and the Absolute and both opened the way to become part of a new 'people,' the 'Buddhahood' and the 'new Adam.' Differing constructs are observed in the Lukan, Markan, Matthean and Johannine portrayals of Jesus, where different audiences with different needs are addressed. The Gospels of Mark, Luke and Matthew, portray Jesus as human, whilst John depicts Jesus as divine. Mark portrays Jesus as someone in action, and as a member of a family (Tenny, 1993:170). Luke describes Jesus as a human being who was interested in helping the poor and the marginalised (Carson *et al.*, 1992:118-119). Matthew reveals Jesus to the Jews as their promised Messiah and the descendent of David (Carson *et al.*, 1992:74), while John ascribes divinity to Jesus and portrays Jesus as the 'Logos' that existed from the 'beginning' (Carson *et al.*, 1992:141, 158; Ruether, 2005:130-131). John also depicts Jesus as the 'Son of God' (Rhineberger, 2006:5). Evidently, the above-mentioned constructs were mainly conceptualised during the context of male dominance in all aspects of society in the Mediterranean region. It was mostly men who wrote and influenced the narratives about Jesus. Even though children, slaves and women are mentioned in these constructs, women are largely marginalised and disempowered; this is reflected in the tendency of narrators generally to mention women in the context of being a wife or someone's daughter or some woman associated with unacceptable behaviour (Schüssler-Fiorenza, 1986:421-423). Masculinity is the norm: the fact that Jesus is male evidently set the foundation for a male deity. After the second century CE, educated male Christians developed their misogynist attitude, observed in Augustine and others (Armstrong, 1993:144-146) and elevated the male above the female through the concepts of incarnation and the story of creation in Genesis 1 and 2 (Ferguson, 1995:90-92, 106-108). These concepts became means to entrench a hierarchy within Christianity where the Triune God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) resides at the top, followed by men, whilst women and children occupy the bottom of the hierarchical structure (Ferguson, 1995:110-111; Goldenberg, 1995:150). And herewith we are already introduced to feminist critique of the male-centeredness of the mentioned religions.

What needs to change in Judaism and Christianity? The well-known Roman Catholic scholar Elizabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza,<sup>10</sup> 'insist[ing] on the reconceptualization of [our] language as well as of [our] intellectual frameworks in such a way that women as well as men become the subjects of human culture and scholarly discourse' (1986:421), finds affinities, through the concept of global sisterhood, also with Jewish and Muslim feminists (1975:616). They emphasise the concepts of egalitarianism, community, justice and liberation found in their religions to critique god constructs in them. They conceptualise their own god ideas to demonstrate that the status of women in their religions was not originally inferior but were accorded their inferior status due to later patriarchal practices. Jewish feminists have embarked on a process of reconstructing worship with new sources or through new readings of old sources (Peskowitz, 1995:26). Many have begun to create their own *midrashim*-interpretations of traditional texts, some in the form of traditional commentaries and others in creative media such as poetry, fiction or visual art. Language and naming are considered as essential components in the quest to propose alternative god constructs in Judaism (Plaskow, 1990:122). For instance, the usual morning service prayer is changed from 'Praised be thou, O Lord, God of our fathers, God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob...' to 'Blessed are You, God of our mothers Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel, and God of our fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob...' (Englander, 2004:26). It is noted that Judaism does not allow its adherents to form (make) a literal 'image' of God (Ehrlich, 2004) as God is perceived to transcend any means

<sup>10</sup> She is notably known for her hermeneutics of suspicion and retrieval when reading biblical texts: texts need to be read suspiciously because of their androcentric bias and then an attempt should be made to retrieve the silenced voices of women.

of literal form. Many do not disregard this instruction but they have simply done what people do in their mind, that is, to form metaphorical images that project a God who shares their values and become far more gender-inclusive. The prominent Christian scholar Schüssler-Fioreza proposes alternative views for the status of women. She bases her views on the egalitarian and community system found in the New Testament and the Early Church context, emphasising a 'discipleship of equals' that reflect the kingdom of God (Schüssler-Fioreza, 1993:11-12). Schüssler-Fioreza believes that equality does not mean women should be like men, as is often the case in liberal feminism which 'fight [sic] for the right of women to become men' (Schüssler-Fioreza, 1993:10); instead, equality is based on the belief that both the male and the female are created in the image of God (Gn 1:27; 5:1-2). The notion of community refers to the New Testament term *ekklesia*, which means 'the actual assembly of free citizens gathering for deciding their own spiritual-political affairs' (Schüssler-Fioreza, 1993:344). However, the translation from Greek to English, which transformed *ekklesia* (democratic assembly) into *kyriak* (church), shows that there has been a historical development that has privileged the *kyriarchal* or hierachical form of church over that of an *ekklesiastical* or democratic congress/discipleship of equals (Schüssler-Fioreza, 1998:3). Reuther raises a similar 'languaging' problem where women in the church were relegated to a status of insignificance (where masculine aspects were applied to describe God) from a status of significance (where feminine aspects were applied to describe God). She provides the example of Word (*logos*) that replaced Wisdom (*sophia*), in some of the texts included in the New Testament. Such shifts overshadowed feminine aspects of God by placing Christ as the first of all creation instead of Wisdom (perceived to be from God from the beginning, an agent of creation and one who sustains the cosmos) as noticed in the wisdom literature of the Hebrew Bible. Furthermore, the portrayal of Christ as the *logos* which was founded on the images of a male Messiah, ushered in a father-son language found in the gospel of John and hierarchical relations between God the father and the incarnate Son, Jesus (Ruether, 2005:131). It becomes understandable how the idea of a patriarchal god became entrenched in the early church and up until today. Christian feminist scholars have similarly as their Judaic compatriots, tirelessly worked towards the establishing of a more gender-inclusive view of god, with mixed results. Many churches today allow far more fulfilment for women, although still reserving senior leading positions for men.

This brief overview has shown that there is no single, essentialist/dogmatic construct of god as history proceeds. People conceptualise new ideas of god as they find themselves in new situations in their search for meaning, notably women who have been marginalised. It is time to take a closer look to see if the *Ubuntu* ideology has diverse constructs also, similar to the previous god ideas and if feminism has the ability to reform it.

### **Diverse constructs of *Ubuntu* and African womanist critique**

What is *Ubuntu*? This African *Weltanschauung*<sup>11</sup> of 'humanness' places human beings at the centre of the community as interconnected and interdependent, dignified beings. Their dignity is derived from the Supreme Being to which they are linked as well as closely connected to nature. It thus represents an attractive monism as it integrates the physical and the spiritual. There are many definitions in the rich variety of African languages and the two chosen here are illustrative. The Nguni and Sotho maxims express *Ubuntu* as follows, '*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*,' '*motho ke motho ka batho*,' loosely translated, 'a person is a person because of

<sup>11</sup> There are arguments that the roots of *Ubuntu* can be traced back to the ancient Egyptian Netchar *Maat* holy belief system, dating back to the moral teachings of Ptah-hotep (an Egyptian official in the Fifth Dynasty, 2400 BCE; Bhengu, 2006; Broodryk, 2007; Koka, 2002). These teachings justified certain behaviour as moral or *Maat*. She embodies law, order, rule, truth, right, righteousness, canon, justice, straightness, integrity, uprightness and the highest conception of physical and moral law known to Egyptians (Bhengu, 2006: 19).

others' (Bhengu, 1996:2, 3, 6; Christians, 2004:241; Sebidi, 1998:63<sup>12</sup>; Louw, 2002:1; Wilhelm, 1998:40). Within the African context, it can be said 'Yu unobuntu' (this indicates that such a person displays *Ubuntu*) when a person is given high praise (Goba, 1998:86; Mnyaka, 2003:150; Tutu, 1999:4–5). On the contrary, a person will be said to lack *Ubuntu*, 'Akana buntu,' when she or he is not appreciated and not worthy to be praised. Hence, *Ubuntu* involves the display of high morals. One's character is viewed within the relationship between the community and an individual. This worldview becomes concretised through the following core values:<sup>13</sup> community - Sebidi (1998:63) emphasises that *Ubuntu* is 'anti-individualism and pro-communalism;' respect - in the African context actions, greetings and words are intended to indicate respect, for instance a greeting may take the form of receiving something from someone with a cupped hand, using *isithakazelo* (a praise-name); *Seriti/Isithunzi* (vital/moral force) - Wilhelm (1998:41) defines *isithunzi/seriti* as 'one's moral weight, influence and prestige. It is what identifies an African as good or bad;' sharing and caring - two Setswana idioms express these virtues aptly: '*Moeng goroga re je*,' translated 'arrive, guest/visitor so that we can feast,' epitomises the African view of caring and sharing, while '*Bana ba motho ba kgaogana tlogo ya tsie*,' translated, 'siblings share a locust's head,' implies brothers/sisters (people) share whatever is available; belief in a divine world - Setiloane (cited in Bhengu, 1996:52) avers, '*Ubuntu* is not only philosophical but deeply religious and spiritual.' It is clear that an applied *Ubuntu* through these tried and trusted core values shape society and the latter in turn keeps this ideology/worldview/master-narrative alive by concretely living the 'spirit' of *Ubuntu*. A critical question, however, needs to be asked, and that is whether all adherents attach the same meanings to the same values? One person's idea of sharing and respect might be quite different from another's; for instance a traditional man providing his daughter for the sexual needs of his influential guest, ignoring the daughter's dignity.

Is there only one kind of *Ubuntu* or are there different versions? As with a diversity of god ideas *Ubuntu* similarly has many embodiments. Three examples (there are obviously many more) of different versions of *Ubuntu* embedded in different contexts, will illustrate this point, namely traditional (religious) *Ubuntu*, the *Ubuntu* of African (traditional) Christians and the *Ubuntu* of African (Pentecostal) Christians. The 'world' (both conceptual and material) within which the 'humanness' of African traditional people is enacted, is a monistic world where African life is intertwined with the religious, a world permeated with the idea of life-forces. The (general) African pantheon consists of a Supreme Being, usually viewed as a distanced 'Sky God' residing in the heavens (Mbiti, 1989:52). It also comprises a realm of spirits which could be ancestral spirits, nature spirits and lesser deities. The ancestors are vital to keep this world intact and ensure the overall well-being of especially the immediate community: 'Ancestor worship<sup>14</sup> is central to our lives. We have communion with ancestors on all aspects of our lives, such as marriage, birth, career advancement, job hunting, death, business travel and any crisis' (Mbigi, 1997:53). Seeing that a unified community, reflecting cosmic harmony and balance, is characteristic and central in African thought it is vitally important to follow '...the ways of our ancestors' ('*mekgwa ya bo rra rona*,' Setiloane, 1976:185). These ways become realised in the African customary way of life. Not only the 'living-dead' but the influential amongst the living, namely the elders in the community, kings, queens, priestesses, prophets, rainmakers, *sangomas* and *inyangas* (diviners and healers) are the actual custodians of this way of life, including *Ubuntu*. Apart from rituals (e.g. rites of passage) and other actions in

<sup>12</sup> Sebidi (1998:63) circumscribes *Ubuntu* as follows: '[u]buntu is more than just an attribute of individual human acts that build a community. It is a basic humanistic orientation towards one's fellow human beings ... one's humanity; one's personhood is dependent upon one's relationship with others... *Ubuntu* is anti-individualism and pro-communalism;' and Broodryk (2002:26): 'a comprehensive ancient African worldview based on the values of intense humanness, caring, sharing, respect, compassion and associated values, ensuring a happy and qualitative human community life in a spirit of family.'

<sup>13</sup> Researchers may differ on the number of values but these seem to converge out of the different views.

<sup>14</sup> The word 'worship' is an unfortunate choice: 'While the ancestors are remembered and respected, it would be a distortion to say that they are worshipped' (Kruger *et al.*, 2009:38).



communities, traditional wisdom, myths, folktales, beliefs, proverbs and languages in Africa are means to transmit *Ubuntu* to other generations (Kaphagwani, 1991:182). However, despite the romanticising of the traditional way of life there seems to be a blind spot for this almost exclusive 'man's world,' where husbands are superior to their wives and men are superior to women, sons are more important than daughters, barren women are looked down upon, women and daughters cannot own or inherit land, and so on.

In African Indigenous Churches there is a creative syncretism between traditional beliefs and customs and that of Christianity. The traditional pantheon has expanded somewhat with the incorporation of the triune God into the traditional realm of spirits. Engenas Lekganyane, for instance, the leader of Zion Christian Church (ZCC) syncretised the concept of salvation (Christ) with the *Ubuntu* emphasis on 'belief in the divine world.' It is not uncommon to see some of these spiritual leaders, often called *abaprofeti/baprofeta* (prophets), wearing rosaries or using the Bible and *isiphandla* (goat skin worn as an armlet) or wool strings on their arms, which are indicators that they practise ancestor veneration (Zulu, 2011:48; cf Ngada & Mofokeng, 2001:26). Lekganyane, however, solely allows men to be priests and leaders in his gender-hierarchically structured church (Mafuta, 2010:146,169).

In the Pentecostal context the *Ubuntu* sentiment of belief in the divine, once again changes the spiritual pantheon, by limiting it to a purely Christian version. Job Chiliza and Nicholas Bhengu, leaders of African Pentecostal churches, for instance denounced ancestral veneration, visitations, contact and some of the customs and practices related to the roles of ancestors among African communities (Anderson, 1992:27, 37; Anderson, 2000:209; Ngada & Mofokeng, 2001:30; Oduyoye, 1997:203). Gender relations among Pentecostal Christians are not immune to those mentioned already, adding also the patriarchal Christian family lifestyle emphasised by American Pentecostals restricting the role of women to the home and church (Scanzoni & Hardesty, 1974:22,30-31). Even though there have been slight changes in the 'divine world' of the three mentioned different contextual constructs of *Ubuntu*, they remain patriarchal. If society and its corresponding ideological world, however, becomes invested with more gender-friendly beliefs and customs, might a new *Ubuntu* arise? What has the 'female experience' of African womanism to offer in this regard?

Some Western feminists write from an individualist perspective of self-determination, ignoring the importance of the 'experience' of communality in African thought, and often overstate their criticism (Bisschoff, 2009:18; cf also Mikell, 1997:3-10). Coquery-Vodrovitch (1997:11-15) calls African women 'beasts of burden' because of their workload, where girls begin to work with their mothers as early as five/six years. They are taught passiveness and subordination from early years and onwards (Coquery-Vodrovitch, 1997:13-15), and are perceived as adjuncts to traditional oppressive family structures (Jacobsen, 1994:156-157). Adjuncts can, however, also be disregarded as a misnomer for a much needed (nowadays) complementarity and cooperation between women and men, which is adequately acknowledged among African womanists with the notions of *Bosadi* (Womanhood) (Masenya, 1997, 1998) and African Motherhood (Muthien, 2008; Oduyoye, 1988; Oyewumi, 2003). *Bosadi* (Womanhood) is characterised by the significance of the family for Africans and the *Botho/Ubuntu* spirit of the community. African Motherhood is characterised by values of love, harmony, peace and cooperation, self-sacrifice and lack of bloodshed (Amadiume, 1997:102, 122). This is nicely captured in the Shona saying '*musha makadz*,' translated 'a family cannot thrive without a mother,' that places the mother at the centre of the society. The agency and power of African mothers are emphasised in their taking their biological and reproductive tasks seriously (Mikell, 1997:8),<sup>15</sup> and also for forming the backbone of subsistence economies based on the

<sup>15</sup> Oyewumi (2003:12-13) states: 'Mothers are perceived as especially powerful—literally and mystically, in regard to the well-being of the child. They are therefore the pivot around which family life is structured 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...'

agriculture, marketing, trade and commerce of Africa (Amadiume, 1997:195-196; cf Segobye, 1998:231)<sup>16</sup>. Motherhood and Womanhood imply an ethic of care, linked to *Ubuntu*, of tolerance of difference, collaboration, non-violent and peaceful co-existence.<sup>17</sup> Verner (1994:2) recaps these few introductory remarks on African womanism as follows: 'African[a] womanism in essence says: We love men. We like being women. We love children. We like being mothers. We value life. We have faith in God and the Bible. We want families and harmonious relationships. We are not at war with our men ...'

A few examples will illustrate how African womanism attempts to reform<sup>18</sup> their societies. The valuing of the divine world within African thought has been indicated above already but along with this also the re-inscribing of gender discrimination:

...when the laws of the ancestors are examined, they appear on the whole to be vast, external disciplines for the good of the society as a whole, with little attention given to individual preferences and needs. The ancestors made... men a superior position in the tribe, while women were regarded, in a congenital sense, as being an inferior form of human life.<sup>19</sup> To this day, women still suffer from all the calamities that befall an inferior form of human life (Arndt, 2002: 138).

When made applicable to the (patriarchal) customs of marriage, widowhood and wife inheritance, the idiom '*lebitta la mosadi ke bogadi*,' translated 'a married woman's grave belongs to her husband's home village' (Masenya, 2010:7) is telling. Consequently, rituals and customs are put in place to (re)connect the wife (widow) with the ancestors. The Kabaka society in Uganda provides an example. To uphold the memory of the deceased (and keeping the community intact) and have a claim to his property, his widow is usually given to a close relative, a brother for instance. He should have ritual (obligatory) intercourse with her to free herself from the ghost of the deceased and appease the spirit of death (Nyanzi *et al.* 2011:562,563). This should happen irrespective of the surrogate relative's health in terms of sexually transmitted diseases.<sup>20</sup> Widows of the Kabaka society, however, have managed to negotiate their role and status within their culture. These women have convinced the elders of the community to replace widowhood rituals that prescribe sexual intercourse with the husband's agnate, with symbolic sexual acts<sup>21</sup> to avoid any infection and re-infection of STIs and HIV and AIDS (Nyanzi *et al.* 2011:563). Africans do not like tampering with the divine world (ancestors), but this has become an innovative way of respecting the tradition and ensuring women's safety. On marriage itself as one of the traditional pillars of society, Masenya is quite outspoken that marriage should no longer be idolised and women should no longer be expected always to perceive themselves as complete only if they are married (Masenya, 2008:9). The ideal *Bosadi* (womanhood), within the context of the spirit of *Ubuntu*, should be based on seeking the will of God so that women and men are informed and willing

<sup>16</sup> Amadiume (1997:102) observes: 'Their economic role was not confined to the household and wider kin-corporate units. They managed and controlled a very extensive market network where they were selling and buying. These marketplaces were also social places where outings were held after life-cycle ceremonies involving birth, marriage and death. Markets and marketing were not governed by pure profit values, but by the basic need to exchange, redistribute and socialize.'

<sup>17</sup> Oduyoye finds the 'mothering role' of Jesus Christ in the daily experiences of African women very meaningful and inspiring (1994:105).

<sup>18</sup> African womanists are also (same as Westerners) not homogenous, with reformers and radicalists.

<sup>19</sup> 'There is no woman as beautiful as the obedient one' (Oduyoye, 2001:31).

<sup>20</sup> The maxim, 'a man stretches like a pumpkin; a woman should wrap herself like a cabbage and behave,' indicates a man is free to roam around and engage in extramarital relationships and a woman not (Moseitse, 2006:112).

<sup>21</sup> They explained that to symbolise the sexual act they would be instructed to sit on the floor on the doorway of the main house with legs stretched outwards, while the male agnate of their late spouse would jump thrice over their extended legs (Nyanzi *et al.* 2011:563; cf Tsanga, 2011:63).

to affirm all men and women (whether married or single) for what they were initially designed to be (Masenya, 2010:10).

The valuing and cherishing of the community (above the individual) is aptly illustrated in the political and economic spheres. A study of sixteen different women leaders in Kenya (Ngunjiri, 2009) reports that these women equate their leadership role with that of servant leadership. They maintain that their leadership is based on values of nurturing and sustaining human life found in African Motherhood and the African view of community. The study also demonstrates that these leaders subscribe to the maxim 'the hand that stirs the pot can also run the country,' a motto the women of Namibia used during the liberation struggle. This maxim characterises the participants' role to transform the narrow view of African Motherhood/Womanhood (Ngunjiri, 2009:3, 21). Again, all the participants trace their servant leadership attitude, that places the community above the individual, from their mothers, grandmothers and other mothers and equate such leadership with the concept of African Motherhood/Womanhood (Ngunjiri, 2009:11-12). They consider themselves to be servants of the community and as being mothers to everyone in the community, instead of only serving and mothering their biological children. For these women, their social leadership role enables them to benefit the community within their role as 'concerned political leaders, competent bankers and managers, contributing to the economic and social development of their communities' (Ngunjiri, 2009:21). On own soil the rural and urban phenomena of *mogodisano/stokvel* (a round robin self-help funding system) and burial societies, in which women are prominent, is well-known. Commercial banks came on board and created a product called a 'club account' or 'savings club' to accommodate this phenomenon (Townsen & Mosala, 2008:1). Some learning institutions have also included *mogodisano/stokvels* in their course contents. The driving forces behind *mogodisano* are the *Ubuntu* values of care, sharing and support (cf Mnyaka & Motlhabi, 2009:74), intuitively and spontaneously embraced by women.

African womanism has not escaped criticism. Mwale (2002:118) raises concern that by seeking an equitable economic mode of production, African womanism is imposing Marxism. Furthermore, they try to achieve the impossible task of wanting men (being inclusive of men) and not wanting them (autonomy from men and self-determination). According to Kevy (2009:412) African womanists' insistence that they can handle patriarchy among African societies by themselves is narrow ethnocentrism. A so-called reforming of ancient African practices can become a means of just reinforcing cultural reasons for men to continue to victimise women (Mc Fadden, 2001:51-52). Despite these criticisms (and many more) African womanism represents a sincere and creative effort to establish a much more gender-friendly *Ubuntu* society. This they do in solidarity with their tradition but reforming it from within. Only time will tell if and how much these efforts have matured to produce a far more gender-just *Ubuntu* ideology to live up to.

## Conclusion

'World-making' is part and parcel of the human cultural imperative to structure our realities meaningfully and where ideologies play a decisive role. Constructing ideologies or integrated systems of beliefs/assumptions to embody the needs and interests of societal groups is therefore not strange and certainly not wrong. What can be questioned or frowned upon are some of the values (or their contextual applications) underlying those created ideas that do not pass the test of sound morality. Furthermore, history has shown that ideologies and their supporting values change over time as people creatively discover new ways of 'ordering' their lives. This is notably true of the focus of this study, namely the changes of god ideas and similarly those of *Ubuntu*. It is therefore not defensible to claim a single (dogmatic/essentialist) god or a single (dogmatic) *Ubuntu* to structure reality meaningfully. 'Truth' lives only

momentarily as history continues to unfold and people find new possibilities in their search for meaning, including ultimate meaning.

Feminist criticism, especially, has played a decisive role in exposing patriarchal bias embedded in some god ideas and *Ubuntu*. More gender-friendly constructions of these shaping ideas, born out of the “female experience” have been at the order of the day. New ideas have become the ideals to live up to, upholding and empowering their generating communities. African womanism with its emphasis on Motherhood and Womenhood, has become an apt feminism to engage critically with *Ubuntu*. It shows its solidarity with the tradition but attempts to reform it from within, striving for a more gender-just society where both men and women can live fulfilled lives.

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