



# A Conundrum of *Makoti* in the Light of Proverbs 31:10-31: Decolonising Mislaid 'African Patriarchy'

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## ABSTRACT

The ideal wife, according to Proverb 31, is far more indispensable in any given society and plays a far less walk-over role in her marriage. Conversely, the highly recognised African term *makoti*, which originates from abroad (Dutch culture), reduces a newlywed to slave status, at least when understood from its linguistic context. This is because, according to the literature that is currently available, the term *makoti* originates from either the "Dutch/Afrikaans" phrase *Maak ons tee*, which roughly translates to "make us tea." Consequently, when considered in light of Proverb 31 woman, the term *makoti*, as used in most African cultures, becomes problematic. This paper aimed to refute colonialist notions of African *makoti* by first describing the African daughter-in-law or recently married woman in the context of Proverb 31. Methodologically, through the employment of the decolonial theory and literature review, it confirmed that the esteemed African term *makoti* originates in Dutch culture rather than the African patriarchal corpus. The primary finding of this study was that, contrary to the stereotype of *makoti* that has been fortified by colonial context, the real African daughter-in-law is more akin to a Proverb 31 woman. The study concluded that correcting falsehoods like these contributes to the restoration of African culture's dignity and the veracity of African history, while also challenging the continued colonial narratives that marginalize African women. This study enhances and contributes towards the decolonial agenda by dispelling stereotypes that misplace *makoti* as an invention of African culture.

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## INTRODUCTION

For many years, social science literature has studied colonisation and decoloniality as important topics. Decoloniality has become a key topic of enquiry within the academic space of most African countries. Colonialism involved various aspects of politics, economy, religion and cultural identity. In particular, it was characterised by a situation whereby European cultural identity appeared to have consumed the cultural identities of colonised people. Decoloniality is about achieving indigenous sovereignty or the right to practice self-determination over one's own culture. In other words, decoloniality is about ensuring independence and freedom from colonial control in one way or another. Decolonial discourse in countries, like South Africa, has been striving for years to reclaim indigenous cultural identities that were lost over time and fully evolved prior to colonialism. This, among others, included the phenomenon known as "linguistic colonialism," which has come to define indigenous African cultural identity. This is an instance where the definition of native African culture is primarily based on colonial terminology. The Southern African concept *makoti* which is used in Nguni languages, and refers to a bride or recently married woman, is one of the most well-known yet rarely thought of examples of linguistic colonialism.

The term *makoti* is deeply ingrained in the language of most Nguni people in Southern Africa that it has long been considered an indigenous word, rather than a borrowed one. At first glance, the term *makoti* or its structure appears to have been composed of three syllables: *ma+ko+ti* conforming of classical structure with every consonant followed by a vowel. In fact, some might even mistakenly believe the first *ma* to be a common prefix used in most Nguni languages indicating femininity. Nevertheless, a simple examination indicates that its origins are in the Afrikaans (and/or Dutch) expression *Maak ons tee*, which translates roughly to ‘make us tea’. It makes sense in the context of African cultural expectations that the woman's husband's family would expect her (*makoti*) to make them tea. That is to say, this portrayal aligns with the observation that in patriarchal systems, such as the Nguni culture, the bride is viewed as the matrimonial keeper and servant of the spouse's family. Although the use of *makoti* is more prevalent within the bride's spouse's family than in her own home, most African husbands have similar perspectives of their spouses. This is particularly noticeable in cases where patriarchal expectations of spouses limit the status of wives to domestic duties such as childcare, cleaning and cooking.

Although the Christian faith has frequently been accurately associated with colonialism, there are instances—like this one—where it has been incorrectly blamed. Through analysis, the image of the wife that *makoti* presents above contradicts the image of the wife that is presented in Proverbs 31:10–31. This paper draws parallels and highlights the relationship between colonialism and religion; and religion and women. It further speaks about the impact of the African culture in particular on women before delving into the understanding of the African *Makoti* and her perceived role. It finally brings an understanding of what the decolonized woman represents today.

### Colonialism and Religion

In general, colonialism refers to an organised practice in which a nation or group of people impose their identity on another for a variety of reasons.<sup>1</sup> Stated differently, colonialism is a form of dominance in which one group subjugates another.<sup>2</sup> Literature on world history is full of examples of how human societies have subjugated populations and imposed their identities on conquered lands.<sup>3</sup> Western colonialism generally refers to a situation where various European nations exploited large areas of the world and imposed their Western identity on them.<sup>4</sup> There is a strong indication in the literature that the process of European colonisation of the world took approximately 500 years between the late 15<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>5</sup> Colonisation has taken on many forms throughout history including economic exploitation, political domination, and the repression of cultural practices which include religious suppression, among others.

The relationship between colonialism and religion is complex and multifaceted. Religion has often been used as a tool to facilitate colonisation, with colonisers frequently encouraging conquered nations to adopt their religion.<sup>6</sup> As a result, native faiths were often abandoned in favour of the coloniser's religion in practically all colonised territories. Malkin states the following about Greek colonists: ‘When founding a colony, the Greeks were also founding a new place of abode for their gods.’<sup>7</sup> This explains why, although many African regions still practice their native religions, Christianity is the most widely followed religion.<sup>8</sup> Another illustration of this is how the prevalence of Judeo-Christian and Islamic beliefs in Africa has led to the decline in significance and vibrancy of indigenous spirituality. According to Onunwa, Africa is growing more and more steadfast in the faith that European missionaries gave them, even as Christianity is rapidly declining in Europe.<sup>9</sup> These, in essence, are some belief systems that were imposed on indigenous communities during the colonial era, who were considered the spiritual objects of colonisers.

Although there is still some debate, many studies in literature suggest that Christianity was the primary justification for the colonial endeavours of European powers.<sup>10</sup> Through the spread of Christian doctrine,

<sup>1</sup> Ronald J Horvath, “A Definition of Colonialism,” *Current Anthropology* 13, no. 1 (1972): 45–57; M. Kohn and K. Reddy, “Colonialism. The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy,” 2006, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/colonialism/?f>.

<sup>2</sup> R. Guha, *Dominance without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India*. (New York: Harvard University Press., 1997).

<sup>3</sup> D. Day, *Conquest: How Societies Overwhelm Others* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Sarah Maddison, “Indigenous Identity, ‘Authenticity’ and the Structural Violence of Settler Colonialism,” *Identities* 20, no.3 (2013): 288–303.

<sup>4</sup> B. Gilley, “The Case for Colonialism,” *Third World Quarterly* 38, no. 10 (2017): 1–17.

<sup>5</sup> David Chidester, “Colonialism and Religion,” *Critical Research on Religion* 1, no. 1 (2013): 87–94, 89.

<sup>6</sup> H.M. Carey, *God's Empire: Religion and Colonialism in the British World, c. 1801–1908* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); T. Fitzgerald, *Religion and the Secular: Historical and Colonial Formations* (London: Routledge., 2014).

<sup>7</sup> Irad Malkin, “Religion and Colonization in Ancient Greece,” in *Religion and Colonization in Ancient Greece* (Brill, 2015), 2.

<sup>8</sup> Saba Mahmood, “Secularism, Sovereignty, and Religious Difference: A Global Genealogy?,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 35, no. 2 (April 27, 2017): 197–209, 169. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263775816656081>.

<sup>9</sup> Udobata R Onunwa, “Globalization and African Spirituality: An Unrealistic and Unrealizable Day-Dream,” 2009, 22.

<sup>10</sup> D.L. Robert, *Christian Mission: How Christianity Became a World Religion*, vol. 25 (John Wiley & Sons, 2009).

European powers such as France, the Netherlands and Great Britain colonised specific African nations. According to Fage, European missionaries and intellectuals arrived in Africa with the preconceived notion that Christianity was far superior to African culture and religion.<sup>11</sup> They viewed African practices as savage and believed that they needed to be replaced with Western perspectives, culture, and religion in the form of Christianity. Lachenicht asserts that the early modern era of colonization was driven by religious missions and the "harvest of souls" as much as by the desire to expand governmental borders and gather wealth.<sup>12</sup> Chidester refers to this as missionizing, or the imposing of alien values, beliefs, and practices on native people.<sup>13</sup> The expansion served to strengthen deeply rooted patriarchal attitudes towards women, which are still evident in many of the colonies.

### Religion and Women

Most religions of the world have vastly diverse views on the status of women,<sup>14</sup> their responsibilities, roles and rights within a given society.<sup>15</sup> While many religions have come to hold a view that women and men are equal, most religions' perspectives on this matter are still rooted in the patriarchy of the ancient world which has been termed oppressive. Etymologically, the term "patriarchy" comes from the Greek *πατριάρχης* (*patriarkhēs*) and literally means "the rule of (by) the father".<sup>16</sup> Religious perspectives on the status of women in a society are closely informed by the patriarchal culture where dominance and privileged positions were reserved for males.<sup>17</sup> This lends support to scholarly arguments that religion is a cultural expression in itself.<sup>18</sup> In fact, some scholars argue that one distinctive feature of the Hebrew people found in the Bible is their exclusion of women from the covenants made between God and humanity.<sup>19</sup> Consequently, one should not be surprised that patriarchal social structures also shaped the perception of women and their status in religious contexts—that is, in many of the world's major religions. This also explains why most religions assign men functional roles and women decorative roles, much like in patriarchal systems.

Christianity, like many other religions, was influenced by patriarchy despite its central tenet that there is no fixed gender hierarchy, stressing in particular that men and women are equally created in the image of God.<sup>20</sup> Though historically and still today, women's roles have been marginalized, they have always been essential to Christianity.<sup>21</sup> While some Christian churches have made commendable efforts to include women in formal ministry, other Christian denominations still only appoint men to leadership roles. Many mainstream Protestant denominations are beginning to relax their long-standing ban on ordaining women into ministry even though some significant groups are still tightening restrictions in response. Acceptance of women in leadership roles seems to have been relatively easy for most Pentecostal and Charismatic churches.<sup>22</sup> In actuality, or at least as some scholars posit, prophetic female figures played a crucial role in the movement's beginnings and later development.<sup>23</sup> Conversely, churches, like the Roman Catholic and Orthodox faiths, still uphold the belief that only men are fit to occupy positions of spiritual authority, such as eldership or priesthood. Furthermore, the only people qualified for high-level leadership roles like pope, patriarch and cardinals are celibate men.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>11</sup> J.D. Fage, *A History of Africa* (London: Hutchison, 1978), 322.

<sup>12</sup> Susanne Lachenicht, *Religion and Colonization* (Oxford University Press, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1093/obo/9780199730414-0311>.

<sup>13</sup> Chidester, "Colonialism and Religion," 89.

<sup>14</sup> M.K. Whyte, *The Status of Women in Preindustrial Societies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 141.

<sup>15</sup> Kamila Klingorová and Tomáš Havlíček, "Religion and Gender Inequality: The Status of Women in the Societies of World Religions," *Moravian Geographical Reports* 23, no. 2 (2015): 2–11.

<sup>16</sup> G. Howie, *Patriarchy. In Between Feminism and Materialism: A Question of Method* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2010), 179.

<sup>17</sup> D.J. Cremer, "Patriarchy, Religion, and Society," in *Exploring Gender at Work*, ed. J. Marques (Cham.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 25–44.

<sup>18</sup> Frances Raday, "Culture, Religion, and Gender," *International Journal of Constitutional Law* 1, no. 4 (2003): 667.

<sup>19</sup> Shaye J D Cohen, *Why Aren't Jewish Women Circumcised?: Gender and Covenant in Judaism* (Univ of California Press, 2005); A. Shapira, "On Woman's Equal Standing in the Bible—a Sketch: A Feminist Re-Reading of the Hebrew Bible: A Typological View," *Hebrew Studies* 51, no. 1 (2010): 7–42.

<sup>20</sup> Michelle A Gonzalez, *Created in God's Image: An Introduction to Feminist Theological Anthropology* (New York: Orbis Books, 2014); Elizabeth A Johnson, "The Incomprehensibility of God and the Image of God Male and Female," *Theological Studies* 45, no. 3 (1984): 441–65.

<sup>21</sup> Elizabeth Cady Stanton and J L Spalding, "Has Christianity Benefited Woman?," *The North American Review* 140, no. 342 (1885): 389–410; H. Küng, *Women in Christianity* (London: A&C Black, 2005).

<sup>22</sup> Jane E Soothill, "The Problem with 'Women's Empowerment': Female Religiosity in Ghana's Charismatic Churches," *Studies in World Christianity* 16, no. 1 (2010): 82–99.

<sup>23</sup> Charles H Barfoot and Gerald T Sheppard, "Prophetic vs. Priestly Religion: The Changing Role of Women Clergy in Classical Pentecostal Churches," *Review of Religious Research*, 1980, 2.

<sup>24</sup> Cheryl Y Haskins, "Gender Bias in the Roman Catholic Church: Why Can't Women Be Priests," *Margins* 3 (2003): 99–124.

Although the Lord's disciples, especially the apostles Paul and Peter, valued women, they still held patriarchal attitudes towards marriage. As a result, they took great care to ensure that there was no incentive for anyone to break the New Testament Household Codes, or *Haustafelen*, which were patriarchal by nature.<sup>25</sup> The explicit nature of these codes found in the New Testament placed men in positions of authority in society and even in marriage. Just as the church is expected to submit to Christ, her eternal head, so too are women, and wives in particular, to submit to their husbands in marriage (Eph. 5:22-33; 1 Pet. 3: 1-7). Thus, it can be argued that the patriarchal system was maintained and reinforced in the New Testament solely by means of these codes. Additionally, these codes were used during colonisation to support or maintain the patriarchal understanding of marriage, particularly in relation to the idea that wives ought to submit to their husbands. In other words, these codes served to legitimise the patriarchal cultural structure that prevailed during the colonisation of areas, such as Africa. How they were taught or understood perpetuated male dominance in many ways, which was consistent with the patriarchal African cultural viewpoint on women that still exists today.

### African Culture and Women

The African culture has been a point of interest for scholars across a variety of disciplines globally. In particular, the status that women are accorded in many African cultures has received considerable attention from many disciplines. A particular group of people's distinct qualities and traits that set them apart from other peoples or societies are referred to as their culture.<sup>26</sup> Odishika also shares a similar view by defining culture as basically a set of shared values, arts, beliefs, languages, institutions, rituals and more that are expressed by a specific group of people.<sup>27</sup> Values can be defined as one's beliefs about what matters in life, as well as what is right and wrong.<sup>28</sup> Baloyi further states that when two families decide to negotiate for the legalization of marriage, cultural value systems are very important.<sup>29</sup> The African continent is vast and as a result, its cultural practices are vast and diverse. The idea is brilliantly expressed by Baloyi, who compares culture to a woven fabric with a variety of colors, some of which stand for traditions, practices, and beliefs.<sup>30</sup> But despite the varied cultures, Africans share distinguishing characteristics in their belief systems and have similar values that mark them as unique from others in the world.<sup>31</sup> One such common trait is the assertion that most African cultures treat women as being inferior to their male counterparts. According to Familusi, there is a broad consensus among feminist studies scholars that certain facets of African culture are antagonistic toward women.<sup>32</sup> However, Odishika notes that some cultural beliefs, such as married men head the family; therefore, wives must venerate, respect and submit to their authority; and that most women openly display their emotions and are not logical like men can be harmful and perpetuate gender inequality Odishika.<sup>33</sup> Baloyi argues that although these cultural value systems are essential for creating a family through marriage, some of their components may be detrimental to a couple's ability to stay married.<sup>34</sup> He lists these as the patriarchy that accompanies ideas of masculinity and manhood, the domestication of women in marriage for cultural reasons, and the dominance of men over women in hierarchical structures.<sup>35</sup>

Familusi describes a society characterised by male dominance and female subordination where men show superiority over their women counterparts, who are usually relegated to the background.<sup>36</sup> This is because patriarchy perpetuates the inferior status of women in society.<sup>37</sup> Odishika further asserts that tradition, culture and religion have dictated male and female relationships for centuries, entrenching male domination into the

<sup>25</sup> Shi-Min Lu, "Woman's Role in New Testament Household Codes: Transforming First-Century Roman Culture," *Priscilla Papers* 30, no. 1 (2016): 9.

<sup>26</sup> Gabriel E Idang, "African Culture and Values," *Phronimon* 16, no. 2 (2015): 98.

<sup>27</sup> Emmanuel Chukuka Odishika, "Cultural Communication, Gender Inequality and Sustainable Development in Africa: A Re-Appraisal," *Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences* 9, no. 8 (2021): 6.

<sup>28</sup> Idang, "African Culture and Values," 98.

<sup>29</sup> Gift Thlarihani Baloyi, "Marriage and Culture within the Context of African Indigenous Societies: A Need for African Cultural Hermeneutics," *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 48, no. 1 (2022): 2.

<sup>30</sup> Gift T. Baloyi, "When Culture Clashes with Individual Human Rights: A Practical Theological Reflection on the Dignity of Widows," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 38, no. 1 (January 31, 2017), 2. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v38i1.1599>.

<sup>31</sup> Idang, "African Culture and Values," 99-100.

<sup>32</sup> Olumuyiwa O Familusi, "African Culture and the Status of Women: The Yoruba Example," *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 5, no. 1 (2012): 299.

<sup>33</sup> E.C. Odishika, "Cultural Communication, Gender Inequality and Sustainable Development in Africa: A Re-Appraisal," *Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences* 9, no. 8 (2021): 4.

<sup>34</sup> Baloyi, "Marriage and Culture within the Context of African Indigenous Societies: A Need for African Cultural Hermeneutics," 2.

<sup>35</sup> Baloyi, "Marriage and Culture within the Context of African Indigenous Societies: A Need for African Cultural Hermeneutics," 2.

<sup>36</sup> Familusi, "African Culture and the Status of Women: The Yoruba Example," 300.

<sup>37</sup> A. Iyanuolu, "The Challenge of Culture for the Rights of Women in Africa: A Critical Analysis of the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa" (University of Cape Town, 2014), 29.

structure of the social organisation and institutions at all levels of leadership.<sup>38</sup> Iyanuolu, argues that men's dominance in Africa, whether in a matrilineal or a patrilineal community, leads to the imposition of male authority over women and reinforces the subordinate status of women.<sup>39</sup>

According to Baloyi, the gloom-ridden features of complement culture are deeply engrained in the community and individuals' lives.<sup>40</sup> As a result, male children may grow up without recognising the oppression of women and the unequal treatment they may face, all in the name of culture. This is because culture dictates the standards and values that shape people's views of themselves and their collective struggles for power within a society. Culture is, therefore, a key factor in how people socialise and a significant influence on the experiences and consciousness of the community.<sup>41</sup> Given the perception that African societies have of women, it is not surprising that the treatment of women who marry into the family is sometimes viewed as that of a master-slave relationship. The following section examines the concept of "makoti" in the African context including the challenges *they* face, the treatment they receive and some reasons behind this unfair treatment.

### **African Makoti**

Marriage is a critical component in most societies globally and is understood and practiced differently by diverse communities. In many African communities, marriage is not just a union between the couple but also involves the family and relatives of the couple. Baloyi concurs that although marriage is an international institution, its significance, and meaning are interpreted according to the individuals' respective cultural affiliations, and these interpretations vary across cultures.<sup>42</sup> Regardless, fundamentally, every society acknowledges marriage as an essential component of upholding and sustaining that society.<sup>43</sup> While currently marriage is perceived as a union between two people, it was traditionally viewed differently. According to Nganase and Basson, marriage involves extended family and in-laws become significant.<sup>44</sup> Partly quoting Mbiti, Ogoma defines marriage and subsequently the family as follows:

The family is not just a component of the man, the wife and their children. The departed souls, relatives and the unborn generations are regarded as members of the family. That is why marriage is not the union or the joining of a man and a woman for the purpose of becoming husband and wife. Marriage is basically a family or even a community affair. The involvement of the departed souls in African traditional marriage makes it a sacred affair.<sup>45</sup>

The above definition encapsulates the general understanding of what marriage entails in the African context. Traditionally, marriage was not a union between two individuals, but also involved the in-laws from the beginning.<sup>46</sup> The above definition of marriage goes beyond the living and includes the departed and those yet to be born. Ogoma notes the role played by parents of the would-be-groom in marriage, referring to the practice of the Nigerian Yoruba people.<sup>47</sup> The Yoruba people of Nigeria customise marriage by identifying the prospective bride and using an intermediary, known as an alarina, who is typically a dependable family member, to inform the prospective in-laws' parents of the woman's acceptance of the proposal and to exchange gifts. He adds that to make sure there is no evidence of a serious illness, crime, or both, the parents of the young man and woman will look into both families. During the early stages of the arrangement, the lady might not even be informed.<sup>48</sup> Although the above practice is unique to the Yoruba people, it was also prevalent in many other African cultures to ensure that their son gets a good wife. However, as indicated by Baloyi, the main issue is that in-laws do not end their involvement with the couple after the marriage but continue to interfere unnecessarily during the marriage.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Odishika, "Cultural Communication, Gender Inequality and Sustainable Development in Africa: A Re-Appraisal," 3.

<sup>39</sup> Iyanuolu, "The Challenge of Culture for the Rights of Women in Africa: A Critical Analysis of the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa," 30.

<sup>40</sup> Baloyi, "Marriage and Culture within the Context of African Indigenous Societies: A Need for African Cultural Hermeneutics," 2.

<sup>41</sup> Iyanuolu, "The Challenge of Culture for the Rights of Women in Africa: A Critical Analysis of the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa," 28.

<sup>42</sup> Baloyi, "Marriage and Culture within the Context of African Indigenous Societies: A Need for African Cultural Hermeneutics."

<sup>43</sup> Lesiba Baloyi and Molebogeng Makobe-Rabothata, "The African Conception of Death: A Cultural Implication," 2014.

<sup>44</sup> Tebogo Rosina Nganase and Wilna Basson, "Mother-and Daughter-in-Law Relationship within a South African Context: Influence of Family Systems," *Journal of Psychology in Africa* 27, no. 6 (2017): 537-40.

<sup>45</sup> Mbiti J.S., *The Concept of Time, in African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969); D.E. Ogoma, "Reflection on an African Traditional Marriage System," *Journal of Social Sciences and Public Affairs* 4, no. 1 (2014):96.

<sup>46</sup> Ogoma, "Reflection on an African Traditional Marriage System," 97-98.

<sup>47</sup> Ogoma, "Reflection on an African Traditional Marriage System."

<sup>48</sup> Ogoma, "Reflection on an African Traditional Marriage System," 96.

<sup>49</sup> E. Baloyi, *Building African Christian Marriages* (Pretoria: Unisa Press, 2013).

As mentioned in the previous section, culture plays a critical role in shaping behaviour, including how people interact and relate to one another in a marriage. Resane describes *makoti* as a new family member who is brought along by a son through marriage to establish a future with her.<sup>50</sup> The transfer of a bride's wealth or dowry, known as the *ilobola* (Nguni) or *bogadi* (Setswana), is a ceremony that brings a *makoti* into her new family—her husband's.<sup>51</sup> Baloyi mentions that while norms vary between different ethnicities, they have the potential to influence how marriage should be viewed within a society.<sup>52</sup> Generally, it is acceptable in African world views that when you marry a man you marry his entire family.<sup>53</sup> The understanding of what it means to be a married woman is always explained within the confines of sociological gender constructs. The roles within marriage are also played in terms of what society defines as the place for women in marriage.<sup>54</sup> The treatment and expectations of the African *makoti* are very much in contrast with the picture drawn by the narrative from Proverbs 31 v 10 -31. This is because marital roles accorded to men and women are based on the different expectations societal groups have of individuals based on their biological makeup and each society's values and beliefs about gender.<sup>55</sup> According to Resane, the common feature in many African cultures is that of tension between the daughter-in-law and the mother-in-law.<sup>56</sup> This is mainly because both parties have different expectations, especially if they are from different ethnic cultures.<sup>57</sup> To add, Nganase and Basson identify unrealistic expectations as one of the problems within in-law relationships, and further assert that conflict arises because of these differences and expectations.<sup>58</sup> These expectations may influence how in-laws perceive and negotiate the norms of family living.<sup>59</sup>

Since *makoti* is an addition to the family, it stands to reason that she will have specific roles she is expected to fulfil in her new family. Among the many roles, including procreation, her behaviour can harm or build the family. This is because, according to Resane, "*makoti* is perceived as the extender of the family (*moaga motse*) and a giver of prestige to the family of her husband."<sup>60</sup> Additionally, referring to the black South African context, Nganase and Basson note that black South African daughters-in-law are expected to stay with their husband's family to learn the newly adopted family culture of the in-laws.<sup>61</sup> Failure to follow the expected practices of the in-laws can result in a negative impact on the mother- and daughter-in-law relationship.<sup>62</sup> This practice is not unique to South Africa and is common among other African cultural groups. However, due to the changes in cultural practices, some no longer stay full-time; but, there is still an expectation to spend some considerable time with the husband's family to fulfil her role as *makoti* and prove herself to the husband's family. For example, according to the study by Nganase and Basson, participants indicated that there was an expectation that daughters-in-law do all the house chores for the in-laws when married because of cultural practices.<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, as stated by Resane, the *makoti* is supposed to treat her mother-in-law—or perhaps the entire family—like a royal. It is expected of her to serve them as a slave serves a master.<sup>64</sup> Mohatle as mentioned in Resane takes it further to point out that rules and regulations governing *makoti*' include, waking up early in the morning to clean and sweep the house grounds and cooking for the entire family so that when everyone wakes up, they should get breakfast, as it was the practice of Basotho.<sup>65</sup>

In cases where the couple has the means to stay independently away from the husband's family, the *makoti* is still expected to be the slave during functions, such as weddings and funerals. Resane indicates that even in this instance, cultural hang-ups still linger over the new couples as parents or relatives-in-law visit, and

<sup>50</sup> Kelebogile Thomas Resane, "A Makoti in a Patriarchal Society: Culture, Christianity and Constitution in Collision?," *Scriptura* 122, no. 1 (2023): 2.

<sup>51</sup> Resane, "A Makoti in a Patriarchal Society: Culture, Christianity and Constitution in Collision?" 2.

<sup>52</sup> Baloyi, "Marriage and Culture within the Context of African Indigenous Societies: A Need for African Cultural Hermeneutics."

<sup>53</sup> Resane, "A Makoti in a Patriarchal Society: Culture, Christianity and Constitution in Collision?" 2.

<sup>54</sup> Baloyi, "Marriage and Culture within the Context of African Indigenous Societies: A Need for African Cultural Hermeneutics," 7.

<sup>55</sup> Baloyi, "Marriage and Culture within the Context of African Indigenous Societies: A Need for African Cultural Hermeneutics," 5.

<sup>56</sup> Resane, "A Makoti in a Patriarchal Society: Culture, Christianity and Constitution in Collision?"

<sup>57</sup> Resane, "A Makoti in a Patriarchal Society: Culture, Christianity and Constitution in Collision?" 3.

<sup>58</sup> T.R. Nganase and W.J. Basson, " Makoti and Mamazala: Dynamics of the Relationship between Mothers-and Daughters-in-Law within a South African Context," *South African Journal of Psychology* 49, no. 2 (2019): 229–40.

<sup>59</sup> Nganase and Basson, " Makoti and Mamazala: Dynamics of the Relationship between Mothers-and Daughters-in-Law within a South African Context."

<sup>60</sup> Resane, "A Makoti in a Patriarchal Society: Culture, Christianity and Constitution in Collision?" 2.

<sup>61</sup> Nganase and Basson, "Mother-and Daughter-in-Law Relationship within a South African Context: Influence of Family Systems."

<sup>62</sup> Nganase and Basson, "Mother-and Daughter-in-Law Relationship within a South African Context: Influence of Family Systems,"66.

<sup>63</sup> Nganase and Basson, "Mother-and Daughter-in-Law Relationship within a South African Context: Influence of Family Systems,"69.

<sup>64</sup> Resane, "A Makoti in a Patriarchal Society: Culture, Christianity and Constitution in Collision?" 3.

<sup>65</sup> S. A. Mohatle, "The Portrayal of Women in Sesotho Literature with Special Reference to South African Novels, Poems and Proverbs" (Central University of Technology, Free State, 2015); Resane, "A Makoti in a Patriarchal Society: Culture, Christianity and Constitution in Collision?" 3.

the same loyal duties are expected from a *makoti*.<sup>66</sup> The ill-treatment of *makoti* is to a greater extent related to some popular sayings in the African context. For example, Masenya mentions a Sotho proverb that says: *Mosadi ke tshwene o jewa mabogo* (A woman is a baboon, her hands are eaten) and notes that this proverb is a classic expression of the hard labour expected of a *ngwetši* in the new household.<sup>67</sup> Baloyi also refers to two Xitsonga sayings which are *Vukati bya katinga* which means “Marriage roasts” and *vukati va kandza mbilu*, meaning “It takes a woman’s long-suffering for marriage to succeed” in relation to marriage in the African context.<sup>68</sup> Although the two sayings are specific to Vatsonga, the same can be said about many other cultural groups in Africa. In explaining this unending abuse of *makoti* by in-laws, more specifically the mother-in-law, Masenya, posits it is simple to comprehend how an older woman can oppress a younger, subordinate woman when one considers how long the elder woman has held a subordinate position within her own household.<sup>69</sup> She may take full advantage of any chance she gets to impose her superior status on someone beneath her. And all these are done in the name of culture which, in many instances, is abused to perpetuate the ill-treatment of *makoti*. Baloyi provides a good summary of this claim when he states that although culture is like a fabric with many different colours woven into it, those colours shouldn't be used against women.<sup>70</sup> He emphasizes once more that the guardians of culture shouldn't decorate culture at the expense of married women's rights.<sup>71</sup>

The *makoti* is to be afforded the same rights as all the others in the family and be free to thrive in the husband’s family. In emphasising how marriage relationship should be, specifically the treatment of the *makoti*, Baloyi challenges the male-female hierarchical order debate, which denies women the freedom to speak freely and without fear of retaliation, by stating that marriage is not a way for women's voices to be silenced.<sup>72</sup> Marriage should be an institution that allows both partners complete freedom to live their lives as fully as possible.<sup>73</sup> Moreover, Odishuka contends that a cultural revolution is required to force male elites to give up their hold on cultural values that discourage equity and the fair distribution of gender opportunities in the home, workplace, politics, and other spheres of influence.<sup>74</sup> Equal treatment and positive expectations are key ingredients in ensuring that the African *makoti* is able to receive the praise as the woman referred to as the wife in Proverbs 31 is discussed in the next section.

### Proverb 31 Wife

Typically, sermons based on Proverbs 31:10–31 are often given at church bridal showers or to welcome new members of the church. This is due to the passage's portrayal of women, particularly married women, as capable people with a range of skills that are advantageous to their families, their communities, and their husband's families. This is not without justification, as Rasmussen notes that interpretations of this passage are frequently brought up in discussions concerning women and their proper roles because this woman is seen as the standard.<sup>75</sup> While this poem primarily takes place in the context of an early Jewish household, Biwul notes that wisdom is personified here as the female figure and presents this virtuous woman as a role model and an epitome of womanhood and motherhood for all women, wives, and mothers of all generations in all cultures.<sup>76</sup> The author further notes that this Jewish housewife and mother possesses the virtues of care, hard labour, wisdom, managerial skills, and so forth and above all, the “fear of Yahweh,” as being the foundation for her godliness and moral worthiness.<sup>77</sup> Interestingly this woman is given the freedom to work and use her skills. Classens agrees with this assertion by mentioning that this woman is not confined to the private space of her home and seems able to move around freely and engages without restraint in trade in the public sphere.<sup>78</sup>

<sup>66</sup> Resane, “A Makoti in a Patriarchal Society: Culture, Christianity and Constitution in Collision?”

<sup>67</sup> Madipoane J. Masenya, “‘Ngwetši’ (Bride): The Naomi-Ruth Story from an African-South African Woman’s Perspective,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 14, no. 2 (1998): 86.

<sup>68</sup> Baloyi, *Building African Christian Marriages*, 1.

<sup>69</sup> Masenya, “‘Ngwetši’ (Bride): The Naomi-Ruth Story from an African-South African Woman’s Perspective,” 87.

<sup>70</sup> Baloyi, “Marriage and Culture within the Context of African Indigenous Societies: A Need for African Cultural Hermeneutics.”

<sup>71</sup> Baloyi, “Marriage and Culture within the Context of African Indigenous Societies: A Need for African Cultural Hermeneutics,” 7.

<sup>72</sup> Baloyi, “Marriage and Culture within the Context of African Indigenous Societies: A Need for African Cultural Hermeneutics.”

<sup>73</sup> Baloyi, “Marriage and Culture within the Context of African Indigenous Societies: A Need for African Cultural Hermeneutics,” 7-8.

<sup>74</sup> Odishika, “Cultural Communication, Gender Inequality and Sustainable Development in Africa: A Re-Appraisal,” 8.

<sup>75</sup> H. Rasmussen, “Finding ‘The Proverbs 31 Woman,’” *Priscilla Papers* 32 (2018): 21.

<sup>76</sup> Joel Kamsen Tihitshak Biwul, “Reading the Virtuous Woman of Proverbs 31: 10-31 as a Reflection of the Attributes of the Traditional Miship Woman of Nigeria,” *Old Testament Essays* 26, no. 2 (2013): 276.

<sup>77</sup> Biwul, “Reading the Virtuous Woman of Proverbs 31: 10-31 as a Reflection of the Attributes of the Traditional Miship Woman of Nigeria,” 281.

<sup>78</sup> L Juliana Claassens, “The Woman of Substance and Human Flourishing: Proverbs 31: 10–31 and Martha Nussbaum’s Capabilities Approach,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 32, no. 1 (2016): 5–19.

This wife improves her abilities and interests, especially in weaving wool and flax.<sup>79</sup> **She is obviously a creative woman as, according to Claassens,** she acquires the raw material of wool and flax and works with “happy hands” and transforms with distaff and spindles the wool and flax into material that can be used for clothes and bedding.<sup>80</sup> **Being a woman of wisdom, her skill is not only to the benefit of her family. Instead, Claassens** mentions that this woman is not just producing textiles for her family, but is also making linen garments and sashes, she then supplies to the Phoenician maritime traders who at the time, were trading throughout the Mediterranean.<sup>81</sup> Her work ethic, which was once thought to be advantageous to a household, has changed, and her examples of diligence are now reasons for celebration.<sup>82</sup> Branch claims that even though her servants are clearly present, she puts in more effort and even works side by side with them. She notices that they are eating well when she wakes up early.<sup>83</sup> Her ability to work hard alongside her employees doesn’t mean she is a bad manager, instead, Claassens mentions that she “assigns tasks to her female employees.”<sup>84</sup> This speaks to her managerial skills, specifically her ability to delegate. She “exemplifies strength, independence, courage, kindness, wisdom, and piety.”<sup>85</sup> Her wisdom and strength are further notable in the impact she has on the economic affairs of her family and community. The ability not only to manufacture but also to trade in textiles surely affected this woman and her family’s socioeconomic position.<sup>86</sup> Branch asserts that she knows how to make an honest profit through negotiating, investing, and long-term planning for the future and her own industry.<sup>87</sup> For instance, she thinks carefully about buying a piece of land, and from its earnings plants a vineyard, something that takes years of care before producing a crop.<sup>88</sup> **Her ability to consider a field and make a calculated decision to buy or sell the field, according to Claassens, is clear evidence** of her ability to imagine, think, and reason. Instead of being accused of involving herself in men’s responsibilities, Branch notes that elders in that city trust her because she is known to seek the good of others.<sup>89</sup> The excellent way in which she runs the affairs of her house serves as a springboard for her wider influence for good in the community; she seeks the welfare and happiness of the whole society.<sup>90</sup>

The impact her shrewdness has on her, and her family is evident when it is said that “She girds herself with strength and makes her arms strong”. A language that typically harbours military connotations is used to describe the effects on her life—strength in this context used in terms not only of physical power or military might but also of wealth and practical competencies, which demonstrates the woman’s ability to live a “rich” life.<sup>91</sup> Rasmussen also agrees that this wife is portrayed as a valiant warrior working to provide for her household.<sup>92</sup> He further adds that this valiant wife’s exploits are detailed, using masculine and military language such as “You ascend above” which normally refers to going out to battle, “She stretches out her hand” which is always aggressive elsewhere, and “extol” which occurs in heroic poems, referring to the singing of someone’s victory.<sup>93</sup> By choosing a woman to exemplify the hardworking, generous, and Godfearing exploits of embodied wisdom, Proverbs has presented an unusually glorious portrayal of a woman for any culture. She is not a passive homebody, but a warrior fighting to the benefit of her family and community. According to Rasmussen, the performance of her chores is depicted as exhibiting mastery of her tools and is elevated to the national significance of victories in battle.<sup>94</sup>

### Decolonised *Makoti*

Prior to colonisation, women in Southern Africa had leadership positions in their societies and served as advisers and stewards of life, lands, and resources, holding positions of honour, respect and leadership within their

<sup>79</sup> Robin Gallaher Branch, “Proverbs 31: 10-31: A Passage Containing Wisdom Principles for a Successful Marriage,” *Koers* 77, no. 2 (2012): 5.

<sup>80</sup> Claassens, “The Woman of Substance and Human Flourishing: Proverbs 31: 10–31...,” 11.

<sup>81</sup> Claassens, “The Woman of Substance and Human Flourishing: Proverbs 31: 10–31...,” 12.

<sup>82</sup> Rasmussen, “Finding ‘The Proverbs 31 Woman.’”

<sup>83</sup> Branch, “Proverbs 31: 10-31: A Passage Containing Wisdom Principles for a Successful Marriage,” 6.

<sup>84</sup> Claassens, “The Woman of Substance and Human Flourishing: Proverbs 31: 10–31...”

<sup>85</sup> Biwul, “Reading the Virtuous Woman of Proverbs 31: 10-31 as a Reflection of the Attributes of the Traditional Miship Woman of Nigeria,” 282.

<sup>86</sup> Claassens, “The Woman of Substance and Human Flourishing: Proverbs 31: 10–31...,” 12.

<sup>87</sup> Branch, “Proverbs 31: 10-31: A Passage Containing Wisdom Principles for a Successful Marriage.”

<sup>88</sup> Branch, “Proverbs 31: 10-31: A Passage Containing Wisdom Principles for a Successful Marriage,” 7.

<sup>89</sup> Claassens, “The Woman of Substance and Human Flourishing: Proverbs 31: 10–31...,” 13.

<sup>90</sup> Branch, “Proverbs 31: 10-31: A Passage Containing Wisdom Principles for a Successful Marriage,” 7.

<sup>91</sup> Claassens, “The Woman of Substance and Human Flourishing: Proverbs 31: 10–31...,” 12.

<sup>92</sup> Rasmussen, “Finding ‘The Proverbs 31 Woman’,” 23.

<sup>93</sup> Rasmussen, “Finding ‘The Proverbs 31 Woman’,” 23.

<sup>94</sup> Rasmussen, “Finding ‘The Proverbs 31 Woman’,” 24.



families and communities.<sup>95</sup> Whereas the picture of an African *Makoti* is the opposite of this, it is not without cause as she is, to a great extent the product of colonisation, and the culture meant to give men more rights than women. According to Strobel, restricted access to land is one of the most important examples of the decline of women's position in the colonial and postcolonial periods.<sup>96</sup> Women had access to land as daughters and, more securely, as wives.<sup>97</sup> This notion is further noted in a report by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), that while systems of customary law regarding land tenure in pre-colonial Africa often granted women access to land, this right was lost in many instances with the introduction of the idea of individual ownership.<sup>98</sup> Even in Biblical days, girls had a claim to their father's inheritance, as illustrated by the account of the daughters of Zelophad (Num. 27 v 8 & Josh. 17 v 4). Over the centuries, women have proven to be powerful forces to be reckoned with. According to Bhuda and Maditsi, indigenous women have historically occupied leadership roles in their communities as stewards of a collective body of scientific knowledge and technical expertise pertaining to natural resource management, food and agriculture, health and medicine, climate change, language, arts and crafts, and spiritual practices.<sup>99</sup>

Owing to the legislative changes in many countries, although slow, women can in many countries own land and decide what they want to do with it. Additionally, Slavchevska, et al., highlight that widely cited literature associates land rights with better outcomes for women and their families.<sup>100</sup> Women's land ownership has been associated with increased bargaining power in the household, better child nutrition, lower exposure to HIV/AIDS, and protection from domestic violence. Higher tenure security for women reduces productivity losses in Ghana, Slavchevska, et al.<sup>101</sup> This proves that owning land and being able to actively participate in decision-making on its use has many added benefits not only for the women involved but also to the benefit to the community. According to Ananda et al.'s 2020 report, "Women's Land Rights Scorecard," Kenya has implemented the two-thirds gender principle that allows women to serve on county land control boards. Similarly, Malawi promotes gender parity in decision-making and mandates that 50% of women participate in village development committees. These developments are the result of regulations enacted to increase women's participation in mechanisms and processes for making decisions.<sup>102</sup>

The report by SIDA also notes that Nicaragua has also made significant strides in ensuring the participation of women in this sector. It reports that whereas in the 1980s only 1.0% of land titles were issued to women, by 2000 that number had increased to 42%.<sup>103</sup> Agada, et al, add that in relation to the Ethiopian government's land certification programme, the issuing of land certificates specifically benefited women because it conferred married women equal rights as landholders with their husbands.<sup>104</sup> This initiative also had a positive impact on agricultural productivity, specifically for female-headed households.<sup>105</sup> Hence, in keeping with the respect that the woman in Proverbs 31 enjoyed, Ananda et al. point out that, empowering women to be active citizens increases their involvement in governance issues, especially leadership roles in the public and private sectors.<sup>106</sup>

Women today continue to make strides and immense contributions in leadership positions at local and international levels in playing significant roles. Walsh and Scully observe that opportunities for increased autonomy in civil society, public communication, and elected representation have arisen as a result of the political transformation that occurred in southern Africa during the 1990s.<sup>107</sup> Many women in the region, from

<sup>95</sup> Monicca Thulisile Bhuda and Mothusiotsile Edwin Maditsi, "Southern African Indigenous Women in Leadership before and after Colonization: An Overview of the SDG 5 and Women Empowerment," *Gender and Behaviour* 20, no. 3 (2022): 20219–20.

<sup>96</sup> Margaret Strobel, "African Women," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 8, no. 1 (1982): 109–31.

<sup>97</sup> Strobel, "African Women," 113.

<sup>98</sup> SIDA, "Quick Guide to What and How; Increasing Women's Access to Land," 2009.

<sup>99</sup> Bhuda and Maditsi, "Southern African Indigenous Women in Leadership before and after Colonization: An Overview of the SDG 5 and Women Empowerment."

<sup>100</sup> Vanya Slavchevska et al., "Beyond Ownership: Women's and Men's Land Rights in Sub-Saharan Africa," *Oxford Development Studies* 49, no. 1 (2021): 2–22.

<sup>101</sup> Slavchevska et al., "Beyond Ownership: Women's and Men's Land Rights in Sub-Saharan Africa"; SIDA, "Quick Guide to What and How; Increasing Women's Access to Land," 2009, 24.

<sup>102</sup> Grace A Ananda, Bernard Moseki, and Leah Mugehera, "Women's Land Rights Scorecard: The Failure of Land Policy and Legal Reforms in Securing Women's Land Rights in Africa," 2020, 5.

<sup>103</sup> SIDA, "Quick Guide to What and How; Increasing Women's Access to Land."

<sup>104</sup> N. Agada, L. Grossman, and S. Williams, "Owning Your Own Land Makes a Difference: The Role of Female Land Rights in Increasing Agricultural Production," January 25, 2021.

<sup>105</sup> Agada, Grossman, and Williams, "Owning Your Own Land Makes a Difference: The Role of Female Land Rights in Increasing Agricultural Production."

<sup>106</sup> Grace A Ananda, Bernard Moseki, and Leah Mugehera, "Women's Land Rights Scorecard: The Failure of Land Policy and Legal Reforms in Securing Women's Land Rights in Africa," 2020, 7.

<sup>107</sup> Denise Walsh and Pamela Scully, "Altering Politics, Contesting Gender," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 32, no. 1 (March 2006): 1–12, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057070500493712>.

the working class to the elite to rural, and from all racial and ethnic backgrounds, took advantage of these chances to shape public opinion, shape state policy, and revitalise civil society.<sup>108</sup> Additionally, the appreciable engagement of women in public life has intensified challenges to gender identities, relations and practices and has altered politics in southern Africa.<sup>109</sup> Africa has even had women as presidents such as Ellen Johnson Sirleaf (Liberia), Sahle-Work Zewde (Ethiopia), Joyce Banda (Malawi) and so forth.

## CONCLUSION

The Proverbs 31 woman, who is described as a wife of noble character, was the subject of the paper, which reiterated that indeed she is worth much more than rubies owing to her incredible abilities and influence in society. The value of women in general—or a wife of such a character—is elevated in this portrayal significantly above that of walkovers, as patriarchal societies frequently portray them. In terms of patriarchal society and how it views women, it is established here that the highly esteemed African term *makoti* originates in Dutch culture rather than the African patriarchal corpus. Therefore, in the interest of decolonial discourse, this paper refutes *makoti* as a part of African culture. Furthermore, it refutes accusations made against the Bible that it denigrated women generally and wives particularly within the structure of marriage by citing Proverbs 31. Just like the Proverbs 31 woman, this paper notes that the decolonised African *makoti* holds a prestigious position in the different spheres of life. More decolonised *makoti(s)* are emerging in the African developing contexts; and are influential members of their communities, occupy prominent positions in politics, lead successful businesses, and receive respect from their grooms' families, like the Proverbs 31 Wife.

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<sup>108</sup> Walsh and Scully, "Altering Politics, Contesting Gender."

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