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Recasting Manhood: Hegemonic Masculinity, Crisis, and Cultural Memory in Sesotho Oral Traditions

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how masculinity is culturally produced, transmitted, and contested through Sesotho oral traditions in post-apartheid South Africa. Drawing on masculinity theory, African masculinity scholarship, and theories of orality and cultural memory, the study analyses folktales, legends, and proverbs collected from Sesotho-speaking communities in the Matatiele region. It argues that Sesotho oral narratives function as gendered pedagogical texts that historically naturalise hegemonic masculinity by privileging provision, stoicism, heroism, sexual entitlement, and bodily endurance. At the same time, these narratives reveal deep internal contradictions that expose masculinity as conditional, unstable, and historically contingent rather than fixed or innate. Through a thematic analysis of provision, emotional restraint, heroic violence, and sexual authority, the article demonstrates how inherited masculine scripts continue to shape contemporary male identities while contributing to crises marked by unemployment, gender-based violence, emotional distress, and social exclusion. Crucially, the study advances the argument that the current "crisis of masculinity" in South Africa is not a rupture from tradition, but an intensification of tensions embedded within cultural memory. By repositioning oral tradition as a living archive of masculine formation and critique, the article contributes to African masculinity studies by showing how oral narratives can be critically reinterpreted to foster more ethical, relational, and socially responsive masculinities in contemporary society.

Keywords: masculinity; Sesotho oral traditions; hegemonic masculinity; African masculinities; cultural memory; orality; gender and identity; South Africa.

INTRODUCTION

In post-apartheid South Africa, masculinity has emerged as a profoundly contested terrain shaped by intersecting economic, social, and political transformations. Persistently high unemployment, widening economic precarity, shifting gender relations, and a constitutional commitment to gender equality have collectively destabilised long-standing assumptions about male authority and entitlement. In public discourse—particularly on social media platforms—these anxieties are frequently articulated through prescriptive idioms of manhood such as *indoda must* (literally, "a man must"), which demand that men be financially successful, emotionally stoic, physically strong, sexually dominant, and materially accomplished. Men who are unable to embody these ideals are often rendered socially inadequate, symbolically emasculated, or pushed into invisibility, producing deep tensions between normative expectations and lived realities (Connell, 1995; Morrell & Ouzgane, 2005).

Although these masculine ideals are often presented as responses to contemporary social pressures, this article contends that they are deeply rooted in older cultural narratives transmitted through oral tradition. Among the Basotho, oral forms—folktales, myths, legends, proverbs, and riddles—have historically functioned as powerful

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pedagogical mechanisms through which communities transmit moral values, social hierarchies, and gendered expectations across generations. Oral narratives do not merely entertain; they discipline, instruct, and normalise particular ways of being in the world (Tala, 1998; Finnegan, 2012). As such, they constitute a crucial archive for understanding how ideals of manhood were historically constructed, why they continue to exert cultural authority today and how they may be reformed to contribute to more egalitarian societies.

This article examines representations of masculinity in Sesotho oral traditions and analyses their implications for contemporary South African society. It argues that while these narratives frequently reproduce forms of hegemonic masculinity—privileging provision, dominance, stoicism, heterosexuality, and violence—they simultaneously reveal masculinity as unstable, internally contradictory, and historically contingent rather than fixed or innate. Embedded within these oral texts are tensions between strength and vulnerability, authority and dependence, discipline and excess, which expose the fragility of masculine ideals that are often treated as natural or timeless. These contradictions open interpretive space for re-reading tradition in ways that engage contemporary social realities rather than uncritically reproducing gendered norms that contribute to inequality, exclusion, and violence.

Despite a substantial body of scholarship on African masculinities (Connell, 1995; Morrell & Ouzgane, 2005; Ndlovu, 2021), relatively little attention has been paid to oral traditions as foundational cultural sites where masculine norms are first produced, rehearsed, and naturalised long before their circulation in modern institutions, media, or popular discourse. Studies of African oral literature have often prioritised morality, social cohesion, cosmology, and performance, with limited sustained engagement with gender as a structuring logic of narrative meaning (Barber, 2007; Okpewho, 1992). This article addresses this gap by reading Sesotho oral narratives as gendered pedagogical texts that both legitimise hegemonic masculinity and expose its internal fractures.

By situating oral tradition at the centre of masculinity formation, this study makes a critical intervention in masculinity studies and African cultural analysis. It demonstrates that the contemporary "crisis of masculinity" in South Africa is not a radical departure from tradition, but rather an intensification of tensions long embedded within cultural memory. Understanding masculinity as a product of historically sedimented oral narratives allows for more nuanced approaches to gender transformation—approaches that engage tradition critically, not as an obstacle to change, but as a dynamic resource for ethical reinterpretation and social renewal.

Theoretical Framework: Masculinity, Culture, and Oral Pedagogy

This article is grounded in masculinity theory, drawing primarily on R. W. Connell's (1995) conceptualisation of masculinity as a set of social practices rather than a fixed biological essence. From this perspective, masculinity is plural, hierarchical, and relational—constructed in relation to femininities and subordinated masculinities within specific historical and cultural contexts. Central to Connell's (1995) framework is the notion of hegemonic masculinity, understood as the culturally dominant and socially legitimised form of masculinity that secures male authority and normalises gender inequality. Crucially, hegemonic masculinity is not a stable or universally attainable identity; it is aspirational, sustained through repetition and cultural endorsement, even though most men are structurally unable to embody it fully. Nevertheless, its ideals continue to organise gender relations, shape self-perception, and regulate acceptable forms of male behaviour.

Masculinity theory is particularly useful for analysing oral traditions, which function as cultural texts that normalise specific masculine practices while marginalising others. Oral narratives do not merely reflect gender relations; they actively participate in their production and reproduction by legitimising power, disciplining bodies, regulating sexuality, and shaping emotional expression. Applying this framework to Sesotho oral traditions allows the study to interrogate how cultural narratives authorise particular forms of masculinity and render them commonsensical, even when they generate exclusion, vulnerability, or violence.

While Connell's framework provides a foundational analytic lens, African masculinity scholarship underscores the necessity of situating masculinity within local histories, cultural systems, and material conditions. Scholars such as Morrell and Ouzgane (2005) argue that African masculinities are neither homogeneous nor timeless, but are shaped by intersecting forces including colonial rule, labour migration, economic dispossession, customary authority, and postcolonial transformations. Masculinity in African contexts must therefore be understood as historically contingent and culturally mediated, rather than as a universal male experience. This perspective is essential for analysing Sesotho oral traditions, which emerge from specific socio-historical conditions and continue to influence contemporary gender relations.

Within African masculinity studies, culture is conceptualised not as a passive background but as an active site of gender formation. Amfo and Diabah's (2018) analysis of Akan proverbs demonstrates how oral forms operate as gendered scripts that legitimise male authority, sexual entitlement, and emotional restraint while delegitimising alternative masculinities. Similarly, Ndlovu (2021) highlights how African masculinities are closely tied to the body, labour, and endurance, producing forms of vulnerability and crisis when men are unable to meet culturally

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sanctioned expectations of provision and strength. These insights resonate strongly with Sesotho oral traditions, which encode ideals of manhood long before individuals encounter formal institutions, legal systems, or contemporary media representations.

African oral traditions occupy a central place in what can be described as cultural memory—the collective process through which communities remember, transmit, and reproduce social values across generations. Scholars of African orality, such as Finnegan (2012), Barber (2007), and Okpewho (1992), have demonstrated that oral narratives are not merely aesthetic or recreational forms but pedagogical instruments that instruct listeners in moral conduct, social hierarchy, and identity formation. Folktales, myths, legends, and proverbs function as social scripts (Barber, 2007), providing models for how individuals should inhabit gendered roles and how success, failure, honour, and shame are to be interpreted.

Within this framework, masculinity is acquired through oral pedagogy. Boys are inducted into manhood not primarily through formal education, but through repeated exposure to narratives that valorise specific masculine attributes—such as provision, stoicism, physical strength, sexual dominance, and authority—while rendering vulnerability, emotional openness, and non-heteronormative identities invisible or deviant. Oral traditions thus operate as technologies of gender, disciplining male bodies and emotions while naturalising patriarchal power relations as cultural common sense.

Importantly, cultural memory is neither fixed nor uncontested. As theorists of cultural memory suggest, traditions are continuously reactivated, reinterpreted, and renegotiated in response to changing social conditions (Assman, 2006; Connerton, 1989; Erll, 2011). Sesotho oral traditions, therefore, do not simply preserve static ideals of masculinity; they also contain contradictions, ambivalences, and tensions that expose masculinity as unstable and historically negotiable. A critical reading of these narratives makes visible the fractures within hegemonic masculinity and opens space for alternative interpretations that challenge domination, violence, and exclusion.

By bringing masculinity theory into dialogue with African masculinity scholarship and theories of cultural memory and orality, this study conceptualises Sesotho oral traditions as living archives through which hegemonic masculinity is historically produced, culturally authorised, and socially contested. This integrative framework moves beyond binary distinctions between "traditional" and "modern" masculinity, demonstrating instead that contemporary crises of masculinity in South Africa are deeply rooted in long-standing cultural narratives that continue to shape men's identities, expectations, and vulnerabilities.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA SOURCES

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach to the analysis of Sesotho oral traditions, recognising oral narratives not merely as aesthetic artefacts but as socially embedded performances shaped by historical context, cultural norms, and power relations. The oral materials analysed in this article were collected from Sesotho-speaking communities in the Matatiele region of South Africa through a combination of naturally occurring storytelling contexts and semi-structured elicitation sessions. Participants included elders, adult men, and women recognised within their communities as knowledgeable custodians of oral traditions. Narratives such as folktales, legends, and proverbs were recounted in familiar social settings, allowing storytelling to unfold in culturally appropriate ways rather than as artificially staged performances. For the purposes of this paper, three proverbs, two tales and one legend were chosen for their suitability to the subject of the paper.

The collection and analysis of these narratives were shaped by the researcher's positionality. As a scholar engaged in African literary and cultural studies and working within Southern African contexts, the researcher occupies a position that is simultaneously informed by cultural familiarity and shaped by academic interpretation. This insider–outsider positioning necessitates a reflexive approach that acknowledges how analytical choices—such as narrative selection, thematic emphasis, and theoretical framing—are influenced by both cultural proximity and scholarly distance. Meanings are therefore understood not as inherent or fixed within the narratives themselves, but as co-produced through interaction between narrators, researchers, and the interpretive frameworks employed, particularly those drawn from masculinity studies.

Ethical considerations guided all stages of the research process. Participation was voluntary and based on informed consent, with sensitivity to the communal ownership of oral traditions. Given that these narratives function as shared cultural knowledge rather than individual intellectual property, the study approaches them with respect for collective authorship and cultural integrity. Where narratives engage themes such as violence, sexuality, or gender relations, the analysis avoids moral judgment or sensationalism, situating such themes within broader historical and cultural contexts. The objective is not to pathologise communities or narrators, but to critically interrogate the gendered norms embedded in oral traditions and their implications for contemporary social life.

Translation constitutes a central methodological concern in the study. The narratives were originally performed in Sesotho and subsequently translated into English for purposes of analysis and academic presentation.

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Translation is treated here as an interpretive act rather than a neutral linguistic transfer, as proverbs, metaphors, and idiomatic expressions often carry culturally specific meanings that resist direct equivalence in English. Wherever possible, key Sesotho terms are retained or explained to preserve semantic depth and cultural nuance. Attention is paid to how translation may reshape emotional tone, symbolic resonance, and gendered meanings, particularly in narratives where masculinity is communicated through metaphor, imagery, and performative language.

The gender of narrators is a significant methodological consideration in a study focused on masculinity. The majority of narratives analysed were narrated by male elders and adult men, reflecting the gendered nature of narrative authority within many Basotho communities, especially in relation to stories concerning heroism, cattle, provision, and male conduct. However, women also contributed to the narrative corpus, particularly in folktales and moral narratives linked to domestic and social life. This gendered distribution of narrative authority is analytically important, as it reveals how masculinity is largely articulated, reinforced, and legitimised within male-dominated discursive spaces. Rather than treating this as a methodological flaw, the study interprets it as part of the cultural process through which hegemonic masculinity is reproduced and normalised.

Limitations of the Study

This study has certain limitations that must be acknowledged. The narratives analysed are drawn from a specific geographical and cultural context and therefore do not claim to represent all Sesotho-speaking communities. Oral performances are inherently dynamic and context-dependent, and the processes of transcription and translation inevitably result in the loss of certain performative elements, such as gesture, intonation, and audience interaction. In addition, while the study foregrounds masculinity, it does not offer a sustained comparative analysis of femininities, which would require a separate and equally detailed inquiry. These limitations, however, do not undermine the central arguments of the study but rather indicate productive avenues for future research on gender, orality, and cultural memory in Southern Africa.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This section critically analyses selected Sesotho oral narratives in order to demonstrate how masculinity is culturally produced, normalised, and contested through oral tradition. Rather than treating folktales, legends, and proverbs as static reflections of social values, the analysis reads them as gendered pedagogical texts that actively shape masculine identities by disciplining bodies, emotions, sexuality, and social authority. The discussion foregrounds recurring thematic patterns—provision, stoicism, heroism, violence, and sexual entitlement—while paying close attention to the contradictions and tensions embedded within these narratives.

By placing oral texts in dialogue with masculinity theory and contemporary South African socio-economic realities, the analysis moves beyond narrative retelling to interrogate the social effects of inherited masculine ideals. Each thematic subsection concludes with an analytical synthesis that highlights how specific constructions of masculinity generate both legitimacy and vulnerability, contributing to contemporary crises of manhood marked by unemployment, gender-based violence, and emotional distress. In doing so, this section demonstrates that masculinity in Sesotho oral traditions is neither fixed nor uncontested, but a dynamic and historically situated formation whose reinterpretation remains central to social transformation.

Men as Providers, Conditional Masculinity, and Crisis

Taken together, Sesotho oral narratives and proverbs that construct men as providers do far more than describe economic roles; they actively produce a conditional form of masculinity, one that grants men social recognition, authority, and sexual legitimacy only so long as they are able-bodied, economically productive, and materially successful. Masculinity, in this framework, is not an inherent identity but a status that must be continuously earned and publicly demonstrated through provision. Oral traditions thus function as cultural mechanisms that tie male worth to labour, wealth, and physical capacity, transforming economic ability into a moral and gendered obligation.

This construction disciplines men's bodies and emotions in profound ways. The male body is imagined as a tool for labour, endurance, and productivity, while emotional vulnerability, dependency, or failure is rendered illegitimate. Proverbs such as *mokoko o fatela sethole se haufi* (literally: "Every cock digs for the hen that is near it") do not merely celebrate provision; they encode a regime of bodily discipline in which illness, disability, unemployment, or economic precarity threaten masculine legitimacy. Men who fail to provide are not simply poor or unemployed; they are symbolically emasculated. This explains why unemployment among men in contemporary South Africa is often accompanied by shame, withdrawal, aggression, and heightened sensitivity to perceived disrespect (Morrell

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& Jewkes, 2011). The oral ideal of the provider thus becomes a source of psychological pressure, producing fragile masculinities that are constantly at risk of collapse.

Crucially, provider masculinity also legitimises forms of domination and violence. Because provision is framed as the foundation of male authority, it is used to justify control over women's bodies, mobility, and sexuality, as seen in narratives where men punish, banish, or abandon wives for perceived disobedience. The tale, *Basadi ba Motlalentwa* (Motlalentwa's wives) discussed below, is one such narrative. Economic power is converted into moral entitlement, allowing discipline to masquerade as a cultural norm. At the same time, the expectation that men must always provide encourages sexual entitlement and multiple partnerships, particularly in contexts of labour migration, where men invoke proverbs to justify neglecting families at home while forming new relationships elsewhere. These practices, rooted in cultural logics of provision, have had lasting consequences for women's economic vulnerability, family fragmentation, and the spread of gender-based violence.

In contemporary South Africa, the provider ideal encoded in Sesotho oral traditions collides sharply with structural realities of mass unemployment, economic inequality, and precarious labour. This collision produces what may be understood as a crisis of provider masculinity, in which men are held accountable to ideals they are structurally prevented from fulfilling. The result is not the disappearance of hegemonic masculinity, but its intensification: frustration, resentment, and violence emerge as compensatory strategies through which men attempt to reclaim lost authority (Morrell & Jewkes, 2011). Read critically, Sesotho oral traditions thus illuminate how masculinity has long been organised around conditional worth, bodily productivity, and economic power—conditions that make contemporary masculine crises not accidental, but culturally foreseeable.

The tale, *Basadi ba Motlalentwa* (literally, "Motlalentwa's wives"), is about the polygamous eponymous anti-hero. Before he goes to work, he gives his wives a few instructions, including that they must not smoke his marijuana. A few months later, when the man returns, he gets a report from his dog that the wives had disobeyed him and smoked his marijuana. For disobeying his orders, Motlalentwa violently banishes his wives from their home. He is aggrieved that he works very hard to support his wives and feels betrayed by their "ingratitude" for not following his instructions. His role as provider seems to be the currency he uses to buy his wives' obedience. In addition to being a provider, Motlalentwa is very powerful in all aspects, as seen through the unquestioned authority he has over his wives, the implied sexual domination or high sex drive that makes him have two wives and the aggression displayed in violently and summarily divorcing his wives. His name reflects his actions and character. Motlalentwa is a compound name, formed from two Sesotho words: *ho tla* (to come with something) *and ntwa (war)*. His name then means "The one who brings war," hence the aggression and non-communicative manner. His ability to marry two wives emanates from his ability to provide, as does his entitlement to their bodies and demand that he be obeyed. This tale shows a close relation between men's provision and women's abuse. The irony in this tale is that the man asked a dog to keep an eye on his wives, rather than the wives keeping an eye on and taking care of the dog. What is common is that Motlalentwa, from the tale, provides for his wives and the dog. This levelling of the human-animal hierarchy raises the question of whether women are so untrustworthy and irresponsible that a dog is better in those respects.

Heroism, Violence, and the Disposable Male Body

Sesotho oral traditions frequently construct heroism as the pinnacle of masculinity, associating manhood with physical strength, fearlessness, and the capacity for violent confrontation. Legends such as *Moshanyana wa Senkatana* (literally, "Senkatana's boy") encode a model of masculinity in which heroic worth is achieved through bodily sacrifice and the willingness to confront death. In this narrative, the young male protagonist rescues his community by killing the ogre Kgodumodumo, an act that establishes him as the embodiment of courage, strength, and masculine virtue. The hero's ascent to kingship reinforces the idea that political authority and social recognition are earned through violent performance and bodily risk.

However, a closer reading of such narratives reveals a troubling reward–punishment logic embedded within heroic masculinity. While the hero is initially celebrated and elevated, he is later betrayed and killed by the very community he saved. This narrative turn is not incidental; it exposes masculinity as a self-sacrificial and disposable identity. The hero's body is valued only insofar as it can absorb danger on behalf of others. Once the crisis is resolved, the same body becomes expendable. Masculinity, in this formulation, is not sustained by care or reciprocity but by a willingness to suffer, bleed, and ultimately die for communal survival.

This logic aligns with Connell's (1995) observation that hegemonic masculinity often demands bodily sacrifice while concealing its costs. African masculinity scholarship further demonstrates that heroic ideals position men in structural vulnerability, particularly in contexts of violence, warfare, and political instability (Morrell & Ouzgane, 2005). Ndlovu (2021) similarly argues that African masculinities are frequently organised around bodily endurance and physical proof of worth, rendering men disposable once their utility is exhausted. Ndlovu (2021) discusses how some male characters in Charles Mungoshi's long and short fiction end up with debilitated bodies and

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ultimately become disabled through dogmatically overstretching themselves in physical work and ultimately. Such male characters are mocked for their infirmities and tend to be feminised. Thus, beyond its prime and virility, the male body becomes devalorised and dispensable in such contexts. The same logic in the Sesotho legend, Moshanyan awa Senkatana, in that it naturalises a form of masculinity that celebrates bodily strength while normalising premature male death and suffering as necessary and even honourable.

The marginalisation of women within these heroic narratives further reinforces this gendered logic. In *Moshanyana wa Senkatana*, the mother plays a crucial role in preserving the hero's life. Indeed, the son is not named. He is known only as his mother's boy or son. As such, one would have thought that the central figure is the named mother, but it is the nameless boy based on his patriarchal dividend, by which is meant structural advantages and benefits that men, as a social group, accrue from the overall subordination of women, even when individual men do not personally embody hegemonic masculinity or hold overt power (Connell 1995). . In this legend, all the people the village, are swallowed by Kgodumodumo, except the hero's mother who gives birth to him and protects him until he is a grown man. She cannot save the people of the village because as a woman, she is not brave enough to face and kill Kgodumodumo. That task is left to her son who slays the monster. Her nurturing labour enables heroism but is not heroic in itself. This narrative structure affirms masculinity as visible action and femininity as invisible support, reinforcing a gender hierarchy in which men gain recognition through violence while women's contributions remain unacknowledged (Mama, 1995).

In contemporary South Africa, the heroic masculinity encoded in such narratives collides with social realities marked by unemployment, crime, and political disillusionment. Young men are still expected to perform bravery, protection, and dominance, yet are denied legitimate avenues to do so. This tension often manifests in hypermasculine performances, gang violence, and risk-taking behaviours, through which men attempt to reclaim heroic status in contexts that no longer reward sacrifice with honour (Morrell and Jewkes, 2011). Read critically, Sesotho heroic narratives thus reveal how masculinity is constructed as both exalted and expendable—celebrated in discourse yet structurally sacrificed in practice.

Sexuality, Polygamy, and Masculine Entitlement

Sesotho oral traditions strongly naturalise heterosexuality, polygamy, and male sexual entitlement, framing these practices as essential components of legitimate manhood. Proverbs and narratives that liken men to cocks or bulls construct masculinity as inherently virile, dominant, and entitled to multiple sexual partners. The proverb, *Mokoko o itswalla dithole* (literally, "A cock fathers its own hens") is an example. The proverb literally means that a cock mounts even the hens that it sired. This comes from observing that a cock is very sexually active and tends to have sex indiscriminately with multiple hens, including those that it fathered. Thus, there is no accountability in this hyper-sexual behaviour as the cock is oblivious of the consequences of its rampant sexuality; it does not know which of the hens are its offspring. Even if it did, that fact does not seem to matter. It just makes offspring because of its hyperactive sexuality. The metaphoric meaning of this proverb is that men can have sex with girls who can be as young as their daughters. Thus, this proverb condones the act of men who sleep with younger girls. It says it is normal for men to have sex with a woman who is young enough to be their daughter. This portrays men as having unbridled desire for sex to the point that the age of their female sexual partners does not matter.

Another proverb, *Manamane a diswa ke bo ntate* (literally, "Calves are taken care of by men"), capsulates the same point. From a literal perspective, calves are separated from cows before milking time. That responsibility largely resides with males. Apart from ensuring that milk is available during the milking period, calves are separated from cows so they do not join the rest of the herd in pastures where danger exists for them. This task takes some skill, and men tend to master it as it is seen as their responsibility. Figuratively, "calves" refers to young girls. The proverb, therefore, says men take care of young women or girls sexually. This proverb, like the one above, is used by men who sleep with younger women or girls to justify this act. Within this symbolic economy, women's bodies become sites through which masculinity is affirmed, and male status publicly displayed. Sexual access is thus transformed into a marker of masculine entitlement rather than a relational or ethical practice.

When read through feminist lenses, such Sesotho oral narratives reveal how sexual entitlement is culturally produced rather than biologically determined. Proverbs that equate provision with sexual access collapse economic power into erotic legitimacy, encouraging men to view women as rewards for labour rather than autonomous subjects. This logic is particularly dangerous in contemporary contexts marked by HIV/AIDS, gender-based violence, and economic inequality. Masculinity becomes tethered to sexual conquest, while women bear the physical and emotional consequences of male entitlement.

The tale of Motjediete (literally, "The one who eats alone" and figuratively, "the outcast"), illustrates gendered power in polygamy. A happily married couple has one son, Motjediete. The man wants many children, but his wife cannot give him that and consequently, he marries a second wife and banishes his first wife, Motjediete's mother. Motjediete remains with his father and an abusive stepmother. One day, as Motjidiete is working without food,

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five women appear masked as monkeys, sing to him, bathe him and feed him – in short, mother him as indeed one of the women disguised as monkeys is his mother. When the stepmother notices the changes in Motjidiete, she follows the boy and discovers the secret and informs the boy's father, who kills his first wife. The husband's violent murder of his first wife at the end of the tale is a shocking case of femicide and is senseless. This is a misogynistic tale about male sexual privilege and violence. African feminist scholars have critically interrogated this sexual economy of masculinity. Mama (1995) argues that African patriarchal systems normalise male sexual privilege by framing it as cultural tradition, thereby masking relations of domination and inequality. Nnaemeka's (2005) concept of *nego-feminism* further challenges rigid patriarchal interpretations of culture by emphasising negotiation, mutuality, and contextual ethics within African societies. From this perspective, polygamy, sexual plurality and violence cannot be understood solely as cultural inheritance, but must be examined in terms of power, consent, and gendered vulnerability. Tamale (2011) similarly warns that appeals to tradition often silence women's sexual agency and bodily safety while legitimising practices that expose them to economic precarity, emotional harm, and health risks.

At the same time, these narratives expose deep contradictions. While men are encouraged to pursue multiple partners, this is at the expense of women, producing a double standard that polices femininity while excusing male excess and violence. Feminist critique thus reveals that sexual masculinity in the Sesotho oral traditions cited here, is sustained through asymmetrical moral expectations that privilege male desire and discipline female bodies. Far from being timeless cultural truths, these narratives are historically situated and ethically contestable.

Reimagining Masculinity Through Oral Reinterpretation

While Sesotho oral traditions have historically functioned as vehicles for transmitting hegemonic masculinity, they also offer possibilities for reinterpretation and ethical renewal. Oral traditions are not fixed archives but living cultural resources that are continually retold, recontextualised, and re-signified in response to changing social conditions (Finnegan, 2012; Barber, 2007). This malleability allows for the reimagining of masculinity without rejecting cultural heritage altogether.

Reinterpreting oral narratives involves foregrounding neglected elements within existing stories—such as care, cooperation, vulnerability, and interdependence—that are often overshadowed by heroic or dominant masculine ideals. For instance, Senkatana the mother in *Moshanyana wa Senkatana* can be re-centred as a figure of resilience and moral strength, challenging the association of heroism exclusively with violence and bodily strength. Similarly, proverbs that emphasise communal survival can be re-taught to highlight shared responsibility rather than male dominance.

Re-teaching oral traditions in educational and community contexts also provides opportunities to question harmful gender norms. When storytellers and educators explicitly address the historical conditions under which certain masculine ideals emerged—such as warfare, cattle-based economies, or labour migration—listeners can be encouraged to critically assess their relevance in contemporary society. This approach aligns with Nnaemeka's (2005) call for culturally grounded negotiation rather than wholesale rejection of tradition.

Finally, re-contextualising oral traditions within present-day realities allows masculinity to be redefined as ethical responsibility rather than domination. Masculinity can be framed around care, accountability, emotional openness, and non-violent authority, drawing on African communal values rather than patriarchal excess. In this way, oral traditions become tools for social transformation rather than repositories of unexamined norms. By positioning Sesotho oral traditions as sites of critical engagement rather than static inheritance, this study offers a theoretical contribution to masculinity studies: it demonstrates that the transformation of masculinity in South Africa must emerge not only from legal or economic reform, but from sustained cultural critique and reinterpretation of the narratives through which manhood is imagined and taught.

CONCLUSION

This article has demonstrated that Sesotho oral traditions are not passive repositories of cultural heritage but active pedagogical sites through which masculinity is historically produced, normalised, and contested. By reading folktales, legends, and proverbs as gendered cultural texts, the study has shown how ideals of provision, stoicism, heroism, sexual entitlement, and bodily endurance are transmitted across generations and sedimented within collective cultural memory. These narratives do not merely reflect social values; they actively discipline male bodies and emotions, authorise particular forms of power, and establish the conditions under which men are recognised as legitimate subjects within their communities.

At the same time, the analysis has revealed that masculinity in Sesotho oral traditions is neither coherent nor stable. Embedded within these narratives are deep contradictions—between strength and vulnerability, authority and dependence, recognition and disposability—that expose hegemonic masculinity as a fragile and conditional

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achievement rather than a natural or inevitable state. The celebration of the male provider simultaneously produces shame and exclusion when provision becomes impossible; heroic masculinity elevates men only to render them sacrificial and disposable; sexual entitlement is normalised while generating harm, inequality, and vulnerability for women and for men themselves. These tensions demonstrate that what is often described as a contemporary "crisis of masculinity" in South Africa is not a sudden rupture, but an intensification of long-standing cultural pressures embedded within oral tradition.

By situating masculinity within oral pedagogy and cultural memory, this study contributes to African masculinity scholarship in three important ways. First, it foregrounds oral tradition as a foundational archive of masculine formation, challenging approaches that locate masculinity primarily in colonial encounters, modern media, or state institutions. Second, it demonstrates that hegemonic masculinity in African contexts is sustained not only through material conditions but through narrative repetition and moral instruction that render inequality culturally intelligible. Third, it shows that oral traditions themselves contain the resources for critique, offering moments of ambivalence and contradiction that can be mobilised for ethical reinterpretation.

Crucially, this article does not argue for abandoning tradition. Rather, it advances a critical engagement with Sesotho oral traditions as living, negotiable texts that can be retold, retaught, and recontextualised in ways that respond to contemporary realities. Reimagining masculinity through oral reinterpretation makes it possible to shift emphasis from domination to responsibility, from emotional suppression to care, and from violent authority to relational accountability. Such a move does not reject cultural heritage; it affirms its dynamism and ethical potential.

In a society grappling with unemployment, gender-based violence, mental health crises, and fractured social relations, the question of masculinity cannot be addressed solely through policy or legal reform. It must also be confronted at the level of culture, memory, and narrative. By illuminating how masculinity is learned, legitimised, and questioned through Sesotho oral traditions, this study underscores the necessity of cultural work in broader projects of gender transformation. Ultimately, transforming masculinity in South Africa requires not only changing men's material conditions, but also rethinking the stories through which manhood itself is imagined, taught, and valued.

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