

# Elements of African Identity Frameworks in Action through Female Leadership: Queen Labotsibeni’s Legacy in Eswatini

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## Abstract

Eswatini (formerly Swaziland) exemplifies African identity through its vibrant blend of cultural, historical, and social elements, capturing both the nation’s distinctive character and the wider themes of the continent. This embodiment is illustrated in Queen Labotsibeni’s legacy, also known as Gwamile Mdluli, whose reign as Queen Mother and later Queen Regent from the late 19th to early 20th century showcased the resilience, wisdom, and communal values central to African leadership traditions. Through desktop-based research, this article explores the reclaiming of cultural identity and historical agency through female leadership. Drawing on key elements of African identity frameworks, Queen Labotsibeni’s approach to governance is explained as reflecting a deep engagement with social justice, rooted in Eswatini’s distinctive cultural and spiritual heritage. Her leadership was instrumental in managing state affairs and rallying the Swazi people against British colonial land encroachments. Labotsibeni’s solidarity with the South African Native National Congress (SANNC) further underscores her political acumen and commitment to broader Pan-African ideals of liberty and justice. The article ultimately asserts that Queen Labotsibeni stands as a powerful symbol of African resilience and wisdom exhibited by a female leader. Through her strategic governance, cultural guardianship, and steadfast resistance to colonial exploitation, she not only redefined the role of traditional leadership amongst women but also reshaped the historical narrative of Eswatini.

**Keywords:** British colonialism, identity, land concessions, leadership, oppression, rainmaker, spirituality, queen mother

## **Introduction**

Indigenous political leadership in Africa provides a nuanced framework for understanding historical resistance to colonialism and the pursuit of social justice. The foundational principles of African identity, centered on liberation, justice, and the preservation of cultural heritage, were vividly embodied in early African leadership, especially among those who resisted colonial domination (Mosala 1989). In Eswatini, this convergence is powerfully illustrated by the leadership of Queen Labotsibeni, whose reign drew deeply from indigenous traditions and values. Her governance reflected essential traits that defined and influenced models of traditional leadership across Africa. According to Ginindza (1997),

Two factors account for Labotsibeni's achievements: her position as *Ndlovukazi* and her indomitable character. Both the Swazi and the whites commented on her outstanding intelligence, her mental grip, perception, wit, determination, self-assurance, and energy, her skill in conducting discussions, her shrewd judgment and ability to unravel the most intricate Swazi disputes, her adamancy, indomitability, and her dignity, as well as her powers of rain making.

This study thus underscores Queen Labotsibeni as a formidable social reformer and a profoundly committed intellectual (Jones 1993), whose leadership was central to fortifying Swazi national identity amid a time of profound political and social upheaval. She safeguarded the sovereignty and cultural heritage of the Swazi people against external threats. Notably, she reclaimed large portions of land that had been forfeited to European settlers during the reign of her husband, King Mbandzeni. Additionally, Queen Labotsibeni skillfully mediated conflicts between white settlers and the Swazi population, as well as internal disputes among the Swazi people, fostering a sense of security for all residents (Nyawo 2024). Despite facing considerable resistance from her advisors, she championed the rights of marginalized groups by securing government backing to create the first national school, enabling Swazi children to access formal education (Kuper 1947). These are key aspects of cultural identity, social justice advocacy and empowerment and self-determination (Boesak 1984), which is what Labotsibeni applied in the 36 years of her reign.

African identity that Labotsibeni sought to promote throughout her reign is not merely a philosophical abstraction; it is a lived experience, a

political instrument, and a cultural compass guiding African leadership (Cannon 1998). This multifaceted identity is deeply embedded in how leaders engage with tradition, heritage, and community values. By drawing from indigenous knowledge systems, traditional practices, and ancestral wisdom, leaders root their governance in authenticity and purpose (Wiredu 1980). Reverence for identity and the integration of cultural rituals into civic life cultivate a collective sense of belonging and continuity. Beyond cultural affirmation, African leadership is also defined by its commitment to community welfare and justice (Genge 1999). Through communal structures such as councils of elders and traditional forums, leaders address societal inequalities, protect indigenous land rights, and strive for economic equity (Kuper 1986). Their leadership is profoundly shaped by the principle of Ubuntu, centering unity, empathy, and shared humanity as pillars of governance and social cohesion (Samkange & Samkange 1980). Moreover, African leadership champions self-determination and resilience by empowering communities to shape their own development pathways (Cannon 1998). By instilling pride in African identity and encouraging locally rooted innovation, leaders resist historical domination and drive progress through sustainable and inclusive initiatives (Williams 1993). In doing so, they inspire agency, dignity, and hope, proving that leadership grounded in cultural integrity can be both transformative and future-focused (Cannon 1998).

Queen Labotsibeni Gwamile Mdluli's life and leadership resonate deeply with these highlighted frameworks of African identity, especially in the context of resistance, cultural pride, and self-determination. She was able to reclaim lands that had been taken from her husband, King Mbandzeni, by European settlers (Nyawo 2021). Through formal diplomacy, mediation, and skilled negotiation, she fostered security, stability, and harmonious relations between the Swazi population and European settlers (Jones 1993; Watts 1922). Her rise to power was unconventional, as Swati customary laws traditionally barred women from holding such high-ranking leadership roles. Nevertheless, she defied these norms and emerged as a transformative figure in Swazi history, her abilities helped the Swazi and their neighbours develop a strong sense of identity, pride, and agency in the face of adversity (Nyawo 2024).

It is therefore argued in this article that core elements of African identity, such as liberation, communal justice, and cultural continuity, were visibly reflected in traditional leadership across the continent, particularly among figures who stood against colonial imposition (Mosala 1989). In Eswatini, this embodiment is exemplified by Queen Labotsibeni, whose

leadership was rooted in indigenous values, oral traditions, and a commitment to sovereignty (Watts 1922). Her reign encapsulated foundational aspects of African identity, including collective resistance, affirmation of cultural heritage, and governance grounded in ancestral wisdom, all of which shaped leadership paradigms across Africa (Genge 1999). Eswatini's unique position as a kingdom that maintained relative autonomy during the colonial period thus provides a distinct lens to examine these dynamics (Bonner 1983).

## **Methodological Considerations**

This qualitative study employed a historical desktop research approach to examine elements of African identity as exemplified in the leadership of Queen Labotsibeni. Peer reviewed journals and book chapters from databases were consulted to obtain scholarly insights on African identity and female leadership. Archival material on colonial records and personal diaries of British colonial officers and anthropologists that lived amongst the Swazi during the colonial era created content that was analysed to identify recurring themes and insights on different eras in history. Scholarly books on the British colonial era in Swaziland also provided invaluable data to the study. The study relied solely on secondary data, which rendered potential biases in source materials. However, efforts were made to cross-reference information to mitigate this limitation. Sources used in the study were cited to respect intellectual property rights. No primary data collection was conducted, thus minimising ethical concerns related to participant consent.

## **Historical Context and Theoretical Framework**

Eswatini was known as Swaziland until King Mswati III announced the name change in 2018. Located between Mozambique and South Africa, the country is a small nation with a population of 1.2 million and remains one of the absolute monarchies in the world. The name 'Swaziland' originated during the reign of King Mswati I around 1850, when the area was first visited by European hunters and commerce. The name was derived from King Mswati I's own name (Watts 1922). Following his death, intense internal conflict over the throne led senior chiefs to seek assistance from Boer settlers resulting in Labotsibeni's husband, King Mbandzeni, being jointly designated as the preferred successor (Kuper 1947).

Significant European incursions into the nation occurred under the

reign of King Mbandzeni. He was asked for permission by Transvaal and Natal Boer farmers and elephant hunters to graze their cattle in Eswatini's lush territory. Mbandzeni valued the alliance with these white settlers, who often gifted him firearms, horses, and greyhounds. He also relied on their presence as a buffer against potential invasions by the neighboring Zulu kingdom, viewing the settlers as a protective 'white belt' (Watts 1922:21). Over time, many of these settlers purchased land and established permanent settlements in the country. This era, referred to by Watts as the 'concession boom', saw Mbandzeni signing numerous agreements that granted vast tracts of mineral-rich land, including gold and tin deposits, to European applicants (1922:25). Mbandzeni's untimely death in October 1889 was also noted by a multitude of overlapping and conflicting land concessions and monopolies. Among them was even the authority to obtain the king's own funds (Macmillan 2007; 1985). Many of these agreements, according to critics, were traded for insignificant things like alcohol and greyhounds, while large sums of money were transferred into the coffers of dishonest white advisors, such as the infamous Theophilus 'Offy' Shepstone, Sir Theophilus Shepstones' son (Siyinqaba 1984).

Following the sudden death of King Mbandzeni in 1889, Queen Labotsibeni assumed authority as Queen Mother, rising to embody her second name, *Gwamile*, which means 'the indomitable one'. In 1890, her eldest son, Bhunu, was appointed heir at 15 years old. Despite society being patrilineal, Swazi governance follows a dual monarchical system, with the king sharing power with his mother (Jones 1993). The young king therefore ruled together with his mother. Later, in 1899, Labotsibeni was crowned queen regent for her grandson, Mona, and remained in power until 1921, when Mona was crowned Sobhuza II. However, from the onset, her ascent to power was unconventional, as Swazi customary laws typically prohibited a woman in her position from ruling. According to Swazi succession laws, a son with full siblings should not succeed as king in Swazi succession law and although Labotsibeni was already a mother of four children, her keen political sense played a major role in her ascent to prominence (Nyawo 2024). Her early involvement in royal matters combined with her talent for converting opponents into loyal allies catapulted her to fame (Macmillan 2007; Booth 1993; Kuper 1947).

## **Queen Labotsibeni's Leadership and Elements of African Identity**

Queen Labotsibeni's reign (1889 - 1925) typified several core elements of

African identity, though she predated the formal articulation of African identity by scholars. Her leadership demonstrated cultural preservation and identity; land rights and economic justice; cultural identity in education and Pan-African solidarity.

### ***Cultural Preservation and Identity***

Labotsibeni was instrumental in preserving Swazi culture and traditions. She promoted Swazi customs and ensured that the Swazi identity remained strong despite external pressures (Nyawo 2021). Her emphasis on maintaining Swazi cultural practices and institutions aligned with the focus of African identity on cultural reclamation (Oduyoye 2001). She recognized that cultural preservation was integral to resisting colonial domination and maintaining national identity (Bonner 1983). Her policies promoted indigenous governance structures, language, and customs, ensuring that Swazi identity remained intact despite external pressures (Kuper 1978). According to Kuper (1947), the title *Indlovukazi*, meaning ‘She-Elephant’ and bestowed upon the Queen Mother, signified a role of immense authority within Swaziland’s unwritten constitution, granting her king-like political influence. She was also believed to possess supernatural abilities, including the power to summon rain. This reputation made her a revered figure, and the Swazi people often celebrated her rainmaking prowess. During periods of drought in Swaziland and surrounding regions, large delegations would visit her, pleading for her intervention to bring rain (Watts 1922). These delegations often brought significant numbers of black cattle for use in ceremonial rituals. There were occasions when she would initially refuse to perform the rainmaking rituals, prompting increasingly desperate groups to return and implore her for weeks, seeking her divine intervention (Watts 1922).

Being a key religious personage in the annual *Incwala* ritual, Labotsibeni largely contributed towards preservation of the culture and identity of the Swazi people during a time of significant change and colonial pressure. She would give the country vitality by utilizing divine forces. The belief in the existence of a universal life force that is inherited in varied degrees by living, non-living, and spiritual entities, was central to the performance of this ceremony (Nyawo 2022). The country believed (and continues to believe) that religious experts could control and manipulate this enigmatic power for a variety of reasons, such as preserving identity, enhancing long life, good health, good fortune, and the common good on the one hand, while pursuing

evil and antisocial activities (Amenga-Etego 2011:626). Today, Labotsibeni's legacy is continuously honored in unity through *Incwala*, thus ensuring preservation of culture and identity (Nyawo 2017).

### ***Land Rights and Economic Justice***

The queen's significant contribution to Swazi resistance was her steadfast opposition to land alienation by British colonial authorities. Her founding of the Swazi National Fund in 1904 to reclaim land from colonial powers exemplified a pragmatic embodiment of African principles, particularly the pursuit of economic justice and self-determination (Macmillan 1985). This initiative reflects a deep commitment to land ownership as a vehicle for economic liberation, a central theme within African identity and liberation frameworks.

As previously mentioned Mbandzeni had lost significant land to European concessionaires and grieved over the economic subjugation of the Swazi people by strong administrations in Europe. Nearing the end of his days Kuper cites him to have lamentably said, 'Swazi kingship ends with me'. (1947:24). However, kingship in Swaziland did not die with him; Queen Labotsibeni reclaimed the nation's political space after rising to power. Through her peace building efforts, she safeguarded the Swazi's culture and sovereignty from foreign infringement. Marwick (1966) argues that her selection as queen was largely a pragmatic response to the problematic grazing concessionaires and European mineral threat. Genge (1999:160) echoes this sentiment, stating that Labotsibeni was the ideal choice, given her extensive political knowledge gained from attending meetings with Europeans alongside Mbandzeni.

The terms of the 1907 land division, which split Swaziland between the Swazi nation, the British crown and white concessionaires, were vehemently opposed by Labotsibeni and her council. Robert Coryndon, the resident commissioner appointed by the colonial masters, and was from north-western Rhodesia, tried to adopt a tough stance when dealing with Labotsibeni, her son Malunge, and their patriotic group. But, he was unable to get his superiors to back him in overthrowing Labotsibeni and installing Mona, the infant heir, in her stead (Siyinqaba 1984).

After a year in office Coryndon described Labotsibeni as 'a woman of extraordinary diplomatic ability and strength of character, an experienced and capable opposition with which it [the administration] was for some time incapable of dealing' (Jones 1993, 402). Three years after the deputation's return, Labotsibeni and Malunge became the driving forces behind repurchasing land

lost to European settlers, through a national fund, with Coryndon's approval. Prince Malunge was the effective leader of a Swazi delegation to London that met with the colonial secretary, Lord Elgin, in February 1908. They received little to no redress on the land issue aside from a disputed and later broken promise that they would be able to buy back the crown land (Macmillan 2007). According to some historians, such as Kuper, Labotsibeni worked to restore the Swazis' rights that had been taken away from them by white people using white-introduced methods. She chose to impose a financial fee on the Swazi in order to establish the Lifa (inheritance) fund in order to repurchase the land after realizing that she could no longer remove the domination by force (1963:13). In her efforts to inspire the Swazi people to reclaim their ancestral land, Queen Labotsibeni is quoted by Watts as having said:

I felt I must lose no time. I told council all our weapons had failed and now with our own strength we must set out with determination to buy back as much as we can of our dear little Swaziland...[We] are against class legislation because it must necessarily interfere with our natural progress and makes and that makes the European the sole judge to determine which course the evolution of our natural history and ideals should take (Watts 1922:41).

Her words reflect the enduring importance of land not merely as property, but as a sacred inheritance tied to ancestry, community, and self-determination. Within the Swazi worldview, land symbolizes a living connection to one's forebears and a foundation for sovereignty, dignity, and resilience. Her appeal tapped into the indigenous ethic of Ubuntu, emphasizing unity, kinship, and the responsibility of each generation to preserve what belongs to all (Thompson 2023).

### ***Labotsibeni's Political Influence Over National Governance***

Anthropologist Hilda Kuper portrayed Labotsibeni as a courageous and confident female leader, who possessed a keen awareness of her social status and a deep understanding of the political landscape of her era (Kuper 1947). In managing conflicts, she relied on the support of her son Malunge, Bhunu's younger brother, whom she had initially favored over Bhunu for the throne. However, Malunge declined to claim his brother's birth right and refused the position of crown prince (Booth 1993; Jones 1993). Watts describes her as a

queen with a remarkable grasp of the political landscape, earning the respect of both the Swazi people and European settlers for her exceptional ability to resolve disputes. He highlights figures like Lord Selborne and Lord Milner, among others, who praised her extraordinary memory and skill in untangling complex conflicts (Watts 1922:34).

In February 1895, Labotsibeni played a key role in opposing the third Swaziland Convention of 1894, which sought to establish a protectorate over Swaziland in the Transvaal. The British and Boers engaged in a fierce struggle for control of Swaziland during this time, and both nations put pressure on the country to adopt a new system of government (Jones 1993). The system aimed to replace the tripartite arrangement established in 1890, which involved Great Britain, the Transvaal, and the Swazi nation (Macmillan 2007). Labotsibeni hosted important individuals, including British consuls James Stuart and Johannes Smuts, Transvaal Vice-President N.J. Smit, Commandant-General Piet Joubert and the Republic's special commissioner in Swaziland, J.C. Krogh. She proved to be a very bright, diplomatic and perceptive representative of Swazi national interests during these discussions. She fiercely resisted the prolonged presence of Theophilus Shepstone Jnr., the erstwhile advisor to the Swazi nation, and controlled conversations about the royal family's ability to rule (Jones 1993). Her successful negotiations with these officials earned her high praise in the *Times of Swaziland* in April 1899, which described her as 'the ruler' and commended her vitality, political acumen, and commanding presence, which left even the king and his councillors in awe (1993:401).

Labotsibeni retained substantial influence even after her eldest son, Bhunu, ascended to the throne as Ingwenyama (King) Ngwane V in February 1895. She was a dual monarch under Swaziland's unwritten constitution, as was previously mentioned, wielding political influence equal to that of the king and possessing the supernatural ability to summon rain. Bhunu's unpredictable actions, such as his suspected role in the killing of Mhabha Nsibandze, the senior headman of Labotsibeni, and two other people, further reinforced her position. Bhunu escaped to the British colony of Natal to avoid being tried by the Transvaal government (Siyinqaba 1984). Later, while under British protection, he returned to Swaziland, where he was penalized by a committee of inquiry for permitting chaos in his realm (Marwick 1966). Britain and the Transvaal subsequently amended the Swaziland Convention, reducing Bhunu's status from king to paramount chief and stripping him of criminal jurisdiction (Marwick 1966). This shift further consolidated Labotsibeni's control over the nation's governance.

When the Second Anglo-Boer War began in October 1899, Transvaal's special commissioner, J. C. Krogh, and British consul Johannes Smuts left Swaziland. General Piet Joubert informed Bhunu that the South African Republic was entrusting Swaziland to him. Following their departure, Bhunu regained full authority but did not live long enough to wield it. Labotsibeni subsequently assumed the roles of both queen regent and queen mother, ruling on behalf of Bhunu's infant son, Mona (also known as Nkhotfotjeni), who was chosen as his successor at just six months old. Mona later became paramount chief and eventually King Sobhuza II (Jones 1993). During this period, Labotsibeni also mediated disputes between concessionaires, as tensions between Boer and British interests intensified. According to Kuper (1947:25), the British concentrated on mining and trade, while the Boers controlled farming. Labotsibeni had to step in to resolve the acrimonious political disputes caused by overlapping land and mineral rights.

During much of the three-year South African War, Swaziland maintained a nominally neutral stance, with both sides staying in contact with Labotsibeni (Jones 1993). Although she leaned towards the British, she aimed to uphold Swaziland's neutrality and continued diplomatic relations with the forces of the South African Republic (Watts 1922). As the war ended, Labotsibeni and the Swazi council hoped for the establishment of a British protectorate. However, they were disappointed by Lord Milner's initial decision to administer Swaziland through the Transvaal. The terms of the 1903 Swaziland Order in Council and the 1904 Swaziland Administration Proclamation, which established a government under a resident commissioner, were strongly disapproved of by a Swazi delegation led by Labotsibeni when they met with Lord Selborne, Milner's successor as high commissioner, in Pretoria in 1905 (Marwick 1966). Selborne visited Swaziland in September 1906 and announced that, in light of the Transvaal's impending self-government, Swaziland would be transferred to the high commissioner's administration (Marwick 1966). Despite never having been officially designated as a British protectorate, Swaziland became a high commission territory, much like Basutoland and Bechuanaland, as a result of Labotsibeni's constant lobbying.

### ***Embedding African Cultural Identity in Education***

Labotsibeni realized the value of education as a result of her political contacts with Europeans. Kuper records her saying; 'the power of Europeans lies in money and in books ... we too will learn; we too will be rich ...' (1963:31).

She was adamant that Mona, the heir apparent, receive the finest education possible for a Black person in southern Africa at the time, even in the face of some resistance (Jones 1993). She initiated the establishment of Zombodze Swazi National School, a government institution for princes and the sons of prominent councillors. Her specific aim was to empower the young king, enabling him to peacefully negotiate the return of land lost to Europeans. This was her final significant contribution as queen regent. Following primary school, the young king was sent to Lovedale, a United Free Church of Scotland school in Alice, Cape, where he spent three years. Labotsibeni made a decision in 1919 to pull him out of school so he could get ready to be crowned king. At a ceremony on 22 December 1921, she gave him authority in a heartfelt speech that her secretary, Josiah Vilakazi, read and translated on her behalf (Jones 1993). After a protracted battle against colonial and cultural waves, this was a dream come true for Labotsibeni. Thus, after uniting the Swazi nation and re-establishing their identity amid tumultuous times, she died fulfilled in 1925 (Nyawo 2024).

Among the revered monarchs of Swaziland, Queen Labotsibeni stands out for her visionary role in embedding African cultural identity within education. She championed the reclamation of African epistemologies and the affirmation of indigenous knowledge systems, advocating for a curriculum that genuinely reflected the lived experiences, values, and historical narratives of the Swazi people. Her approach to indigenizing education emphasized the integration of African perspectives, languages, histories, and philosophies into formal learning structures. By challenging the dominance of Western paradigms, she promoted a more inclusive and contextually relevant educational model. Importantly, her vision did not seek to discard Western knowledge, but rather to harmonize it with African wisdom, creating a richer, more balanced, and empowering learning experience.

### ***Pan-African Solidarity***

Pan-Africanism has evolved over time, and its theories have been shaped by various historical events and influential figures, including legendary female leaders like Labotsibeni. It aims to encourage and strengthen bonds of solidarity between all indigenous and diaspora ethnic groups of African descent. Its emphasis on the importance of social solidarity among Africans, which includes promotion of social justice, equality, and human rights for all Africans, shaped Labotsibeni's foreign policy. Also, its focus on the liberation

of African countries from colonial rule and the decolonization of African minds, inspired her to call for the rejection of colonial ideologies and the promotion of African-centered ways of thinking. Thus, Labotsibeni's support for the South African Native National Congress (SANNC, later ANC) reflected elements of African identity which put emphasis on collective struggle and solidarity (Williams 1993). Her financial and moral support for early Pan-African movements demonstrated an understanding of the interconnected nature of African liberation struggles (Cannon 1988). She recognized that the struggle for Swazi sovereignty was part of a broader African fight against colonial subjugation (Bonner 1983).

Queen Labotsibeni was instrumental in establishing the *Lifa* Fund, which aimed to buy back land from colonial settlers. After Swaziland became a British Protectorate and lost a significant portion of its land to European settlers, the Lifa Fund was established by Queen Labotsibeni to repurchase land from these settlers. Although the fund had limited success during her lifetime, it laid the groundwork for future land reclamation efforts (Nyawo 2024). Her legacy inspired subsequent generations that embraced Pan-Africanism to continue the fight for their land rights. Labotsibeni also co-founded the newspaper *Abantu Batho* in 1912, which became an important platform for black political elites to unite and fight against tribalism and colonial oppression. In reference to Labotsibeni's political acumen, Ginindza (1996) states that '... for someone without formal education, her wisdom, her perception, her wit, and determination became a force to be reckoned with'. Her deep involvement in the activities of the South African Native National Congress (SANNC), now known as the ANC, led her to establish and finance the *Abantu-Batho* newspaper in 1921 (Mokoatsi 2017). The newspaper's first editor, Cleopas Kunene, had previously served as her secretary and interpreter. Ginindza continues by saying that her influence even extended outside of Swaziland. She was therefore recognized as one of the 'forgotten' African women who made a substantial contribution to the struggle against colonialism on March 8 2017, International Woman's Day (Nyawo 2024). Her actions and leadership can therefore be seen as aligning with the goals of the African identity-oriented Pan Africanism, which seeks to empower and liberate oppressed communities through social justice and unity.

### ***Gendered Leadership within Customary and Sacred Spheres***

Queen Labotsibeni's leadership challenges traditional narratives about gender

roles in both African traditional society and Christian contexts. Her ability to navigate both indigenous and colonial power structures while maintaining authority, offers insights into women's position in traditional African leadership roles (Oduyoye 2001); the intersection of gender, power, and religious authority (Williams 1993); and the contribution of female leadership to liberation theology (Cannon 1988). The Swazis at the time took pride in *Indlovukati* (She-elephant) or the Queen Mother magical abilities to make rain. She would receive visits from sizable delegations pleading with her to bring rain during droughts in the nation and its surrounding regions (Watts 1922). For ceremonial performances, they would import a lot of black cattle. In certain cases, she would decline to make rain, and for weeks, larger and more frantic deputations would plead with her. They would say; 'you are hard-hearted, Oh! *Ndlovukati*, our cattle will soon be dead, and there are no mealies. Make rain, you starve us all' (Watts 1922:35). There would be severe winds and a lot of rain if she made rain when convinced. Agricultural products would be washed away, rivers would overrun their banks, and there would be widespread devastation. '*Ndlovukati*, you are crueller than ever', the deputies would say upon their return. You starved us before, now you kill us!' She would reply; 'it is a punishment ... I did not want to make rain, and you forced me to do it. Now I shall not stop it, and it will teach you not to trouble me again at inconvenient times' (Watts 1922:38).

Rarely, though, the governing queen would be unable to summon rain, and the drought would continue. *Tinkhomo temdumezulu* or black cattle, were gathered from various chiefdoms and presented as sacrifices at the royal palace in order to appease the nation's ancestors. Only virgin girls were to drive and bring these black cattle to the *Indlovukazi* (Watts 1922). The girls would return to their own homes after giving birth, remaining silent and not turning around. Their sexual purity and the fact that 'they did not know a man' were thought to have an effect on the effectiveness of the Queen Mother's rain-making abilities (Nyawo 2017). The people would travel to sacred sites where Mlentengamunye was thought to have appeared on the holy mountain, begging for rain, if all other attempts failed. They would also take their seeds to these places before to the planting season so that the messenger of the Creator may bless them.

Labotsibeni would harness divine forces to provide life to the nation as part of her religious function as a rain maker, which was also prominently highlighted at the annual *Incwala* which is a sacred celebration. The idea in the existence of a universal life force that is inherited in varied degrees by living,

non-living, and spiritual creatures was central to the performance of this ritual (Nyawo 2024). The country thought that religious experts could manipulate and control this enigmatic power for a variety of reasons, such as promoting long life, good health, good fortune, and the common good on the one hand, and pursuing evil and antisocial activities on the other (Amenga-Etego 2011:626). As a custom that keeps Emaswati united as a country and offers protection from natural calamities and evil spirits, *Incwala* continues to honor the tradition of Labotsibeni the rainmaker (Nyawo 2017). The ritual includes rainmaking, tasting the season's first fruits, offering sacrifices to the ancestors, and celebrating in general (Kuper 1986; 1978). She was known as the rainmaker because rain would fall during the cleansing ritual, during which all of the items used in the *Incwala* ceremony would be burned in the fire. Witnesses describe the fire as purification and an offering to the ancestors, who must accept it with rain, and as a guarantee of a bountiful harvest in the coming year, according to Malan (1985:19). With the knowledge that rain would put out the fires, the people would dance. Since it would be a betrayal of the rain doctor and the national ancestors who send down the rain, they would not evacuate to safety in the event of a heavy storm (*Siyinqaba* 1984).

Labotsibeni combined her indigenous spirituality with Christianity. Her regime was characterised by an influx of Christian Zionist and Ethiopian Movements from South Africa. Like all other Christian denominations that had already made in-roads into the country, the Zionist faith was introduced into the country by the royal family (Sundkler 1976). This outgrowth of South African Zionism was very tolerant of African culture and customs; hence the senior members of the royal family (including Queen Labotsibeni) had no difficulty in embracing it (Kumalo 2013:75). Sundkler shares a narrative of how Labotsibeni got healed from temporary blindness after she had been prayed for by a Zionist priest. When her sight was restored she asserted; 'never shall I abandon a church that has helped me thus' (1976:56). Labotsibeni and all subsequent leaders became patrons to Zionist churches in Swaziland. They protected the Zionists against attacks from British colonialists and their supporting Christian missions, who labelled them a society of witches (Mzizi 2003; M'Passou 1994).

Nyawo (2020) in her article titled 'Swimming against the tide' argues that Labotsibeni's leadership challenges the assumption that customary and sacred spheres are inherently patriarchal. Her reign illustrates how women can reclaim power through cultural and spiritual roles, using them as platforms for resistance and transformation. Her story is a testament to feminist resilience,

showing that empowerment within traditional structures is possible when women assert agency and redefine leadership norms.

## **Her Impact on Contemporary African Thought**

Labotsibeni's leadership emerged before the establishment of formal theological frameworks, embodying enduring African principles of resistance, cultural preservation, and spiritual guardianship. Her actions offer historical precedents for indigenous opposition to colonial domination, particularly through her integration of traditional Swazi customs and spiritual practices. As a female leader, she embodied the fusion of political authority and sacred responsibility, challenging colonial incursions and missionary efforts that sought to dismantle African cultural systems (Ginindza 1987). Her support for Zionist movements, valued for their tolerance of indigenous beliefs, demonstrates her commitment to restoring Swazi identity and resisting cultural erasure.

Labotsibeni's legacy is best understood through the lens of African identity and indigenous agency. Her participation in rituals such as the *Incwala*, which centers communal healing and ancestral connection, affirms the role of spirituality in African governance and social cohesion (Kuper 1986). Her leadership was not confined to political strategy but extended into cultural reclamation and spiritual affirmation. In this way, she exemplifies the lived philosophy of African womanhood, where leadership is holistic, intergenerational, and rooted in land, lineage, and community. Her land recovery efforts were particularly significant for Swazi women, who, despite enduring patriarchal constraints, remain central custodians of land and cultural continuity within Eswatini. For a Liswati woman, land is far more than a material resource; it embodies ancestral connection, spiritual depth, and cultural belonging. Labotsibeni recognized this sacred relationship and emerged as a formidable woman activist resisting colonial land incursions that threatened not only national sovereignty but the heritage of Swazi women in particular.

Echoing Mercy Amba Oduyoye's insight that theology, and by extension leadership, is not confined to academic discourse but is lived through acts of resistance, governance, and communal advocacy (Oduyoye 2001), Labotsibeni's legacy becomes a lived theology rooted in African identity. Her leadership offered shelter and strength to women who have historically faced dual layers of oppression. The paradox she confronted, that land holds profound cultural and spiritual meaning for women while societal structures deny them ownership, underscores the transformative nature of her campaign.

By reclaiming land and affirming women's ties to it, Labotsibeni modeled a leadership approach grounded in indigenous knowledge systems and spiritual responsibility, reinforcing the foundational role of African women as cultural stewards and political visionaries. Her legacy continues to inspire contemporary African feminist thought, emphasizing the enduring relevance of female-led resistance in shaping decolonial futures.

Queen Labotsibeni's stirring call to reclaim Swazi land in 1914 was more than political; it was a profound cultural reawakening. Her leadership reflected a distinctly African mode of resistance, anchored in ancestral memory, communal solidarity, and indigenous knowledge systems. In mobilizing the Swazi, she reignited the symbolic power of land not as an economic commodity, but as the soul of a nation, a repository of history, spirituality, and identity (Jones 1993). This movement resonated with broader patterns across southern Africa, where leaders like Labotsibeni resisted colonial dispossession not just through legal or armed struggle, but by revitalizing rituals, and oral traditions (Ginindza 1997). Her emphasis on unity echoed the philosophy of *Ubuntu*, affirming that individual well-being is inseparable from the collective (Samkange & Samkange 1980). Through this lens, the struggle to buy back land became an assertion of dignity, sovereignty, and cultural survival. By invoking inherited wisdom and emphasizing continuity between past and future generations, Labotsibeni exemplified what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) might call a 'decolonial imagination', which draws strength from indigenous epistemologies rather than Western paradigms. Her resistance was rooted not in reaction, but in restoration, a healing act for a people seeking to reclaim their place in history.

Her legacy therefore provides valuable insights for contemporary discussions of African identity, female leadership, and African resistance to colonial power. Her firm control over the mechanisms of power to restore cultural identity and history, along with her resolve to defy cultural norms and ascend to the position of queen mother despite obstacles, embody the fundamental tenets of African thought (Nyawo 2020). Labotsibeni defied the patriarchal expectations that sought to control female sexuality, particularly the notion that a queen mother should have only one son, among other restrictive qualifications. Such norms often pressure women to define their identity and worth solely through their ability to bear children, especially sons. According to Nganga (2011) and other African women scholars, women frequently internalize the dynamics of male-dominated social hierarchies, shaping their self-perception to align with the belief that their value is tied to producing male

heirs. This system thus allows men to perpetuate their dominance through social institutions, cultural norms, traditional values, and religious practices, ensuring their legacies endure across generations (Nyawo 2014).

## **Conclusion**

Queen Labotsibeni's leadership serves as a powerful testament to the resilience and wisdom embedded in African identity. Her strategic governance, cultural stewardship, and unwavering defiance of colonial land exploitation reframed the role of women in traditional authority and reshaped Eswatini's historical narrative. As scholars continue to interrogate leadership through African frameworks, Labotsibeni emerges not merely as a historical figure, but as a symbol of visionary resistance, one whose legacy invites a deeper appreciation of indigenous female leadership and its enduring relevance across the continent (Genge 1999). Her life and leadership challenged entrenched norms, demonstrating that women's identities and contributions extend far beyond the confines of patriarchal expectations. With Queen Labotsibeni, what mattered the most was the reclaiming of Swazi cultural identity and history lost by both females and males through land incursions by colonial masters. We see her active engagement in social justice issues, where she fought against systemic racism, economic exploitation, and other forms of oppression even at Pan-African level. African identity, as it seeks to affirm the cultural and historical identity of black people, also incorporates elements of African heritage and traditions into its practice. This includes acknowledging the contributions of African spirituality and indigenous beliefs, which we see demonstrated in Labotsibeni as a rainmaker. By re-examining historical figures like Labotsibeni through the lens of African identity, we therefore gain a richer understanding of the lasting legacy female leaders establish, which ought to influence later generations. Her integration into contemporary African thought challenges western theological paradigms, whilst promoting cultural identity, spirituality and resistance in African contexts.

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