



# G.H. Franz's *Modjadji*: archetypes of time and the transcendence of history

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## Abstract

### G.H. Franz's *Modjadji*: archetypes of time and the transcendence of history

*This article examines the Northern Sotho play, "Modjadji", written by G.H. Franz. The text, about which there is little significant critical literature, presents in mythological terms the quest of the Lobedu rain queen, Modjadji, for secure governance and release from the exigencies of history, both for herself and her people. Through staged ritual, the play evokes archetypes of time to raise a mythic consciousness. This ontology employs a notion of circular time to transcend linearity and its inexorable teleology. Ultimately, the text attempts to extract viable elements of traditional epistemology in order to accommodate its addressees to modernity.*

## Opsomming

### G.H. Franz se *Modjadji*: die transendensie van geskiedenis deur argetipes van tyd

*Hierdie artikel ondersoek die Noord-Sotho toneelstuk "Modjadji", geskryf deur G.H. Franz. Dié teks, waaroor daar min belangrike toneelkritiek bestaan, beeld in mitologiese terme die soektog uit van die Lobedu-reënkoningin, Modjadji, na 'n gevestigde regeringswyse vir haar mense, sowel as haar eie bevryding van die wisselvalligheid van die geskiedenis. Deur middel van rituele toneelaksies ontsluit hierdie drama die argetipe van tyd tot 'n mitiese bewuswording. Hierdie ontologie toon hoe sirkulêre tyd die onverbiddele teleologie van liniêre tyd te bowe kan kom. Bowenal poog die teks om lewensvatbare*

*beginnels van die tradisionele kennisteorie uit te lig, om sodoende die gehoor met moderniteit in aanraking te bring.*

Time present and time past  
Are both perhaps present in time future  
And time future contained in time past.  
If all time is eternally present  
All time is unredeemable.  
(Eliot, 1963; "Burnt Norton" from *The four quartets*.)

## 1. Introduction: the writer

*Modjadji* (1957) written by G.H. Franz (1896-1956), is one of the earliest dramas in Northern Sotho. Franz, the son of a missionary, was born in a rural district east of present-day Polokwane. In 1926, he became inspector for Bantu Education in the Free State, and in 1930 became chief inspector for Bantu Education in the Transvaal. He spoke six languages fluently and wrote dramas, short stories and novels in Northern Sotho, Afrikaans and English (Franz, 1981: intro.) His main theme is the reconciliation between tradition and modernity, black and white (Franz, 1981:intro.). His English novel *Tau, the chieftain's son* (Franz, 1929) and *Modjadji* are atypical in that both are set in an ahistorical precolonial past where they focus on traditional tribal blacks and the dilemmas they experience.

Rob Antonissen (1998:43) has criticised the evocation of the pre-colonial past as expressing an "idealized vision ... as well as a patronizing one". However, he has the Afrikaans version of the play in mind. The Northern Sotho would not carry the baggage of apartheid and European condescension nearly as much, even though it was written by a white Afrikaner. Similarly commenting on the Afrikaans version of *Modjadji*, J.C. Kannemeyer (2005:137) maintains that "*Modjadji* deals further with Franz's Basotho (sic) material. ... These publications actually show no progress in his work and can actually be seen as a retrogression". While this may be true of the Afrikaans version, it is one of the aims of this article to show the contrary in the case of the Northern Sotho original.

## 2. The narrative

The narrative of *Modjadji* outlines how a young woman, Modjadji, is elevated to the position of rain queen to her people, the Lobedu (subsequently, all the female rulers of the Lobedu are known by the title, Modjadji). Her central quest is to achieve benevolent power over her people and to be granted immortality by the ancestors, or divine ones. Accordingly, the central concerns of the play are power,

its proper use and the transcendence of time. In so doing, *Modjadji* presents notions of history and time quite different from what were dominant in the West.

### 3. Historicity

For the urbanised Enlightenment (and post-Enlightenment) Westerner, time is largely perceived as linear. This concept of time derives from the eschatological traditions of Judaism and Christianity (Eliade, 1965:143).<sup>1</sup> In Christianity, the linearity of time was already outlined by St. Irenaeus of Lyon and made orthodox by St. Augustine. In this view, time has a beginning in the act of creation and an end in the second coming of Christ and the last judgment: time is irreversible and moves forward ineluctably. This eschatology also implies that time is linear in progression and that it is teleological in direction.<sup>2</sup> With its teleology, which culminates in the divine dissolution of the fallen world, Christianity and its related religions can thus redeem time and consequently enable its adherents to transcend the catastrophes, military disasters, social injustices and personal suffering inherent in history – the “terror of history” – by positing a metahistorical meaning (Eliade, 1965:137).

The Christian tradition was challenged by philosophers such as Hegel and Marx, but even for Marx history is linear and teleological. “Marxism preserves a meaning to history”, because “for Marxism, events are not a succession of arbitrary events; they exhibit a coherent structure and, above all, they lead to a definite end – the final elimination of the terror of history” (Eliade, 1965:149). However, there are elements in Marxist and Christian – especially Calvinist Christian – thinking that are deterministic because they trap in unredeemed time those who will not partake of its teleological end: those who, through no fault of their own, will not enter the worker’s state because they do not live in the right moment of history, or will not enter heaven because they are not predestined to do so. Thus, extreme approaches to linear time can involve determinism. There is also the later position held by various thinkers such as Dilthey,

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1 One can exaggerate the pure linearity and teleology of the lived Western experience for in the Medieval Age and much later rural Europeans lived in the non-linear cycles of the seasons. Even the church had and still has its annual cycle of feast days and holy days enshrined in the liturgy.

2 Time for medieval man, especially the rural peasants, could be said to have had a spiral formation, thus combining both cyclicity and teleology.

Croce, Sartre and Derrida that history had no intrinsic meaning, no teleology.<sup>3</sup>

However, for most Western people, this "philosophical historicism" belongs to the elite (Eliade, 1965:152). Even for those who adhere to no religion, there is a belief in material progress, however vaguely defined, inherited from the Enlightenment and put into practice in the huge Western global expansion during the nineteenth century. The idea of progress allows for an irreversible, linear progression of events. The purpose of history may not be in some far, distant future, but is in progress itself.

A very different sense of time and history – from which Europe diverged during the Renaissance and the Enlightenment<sup>4</sup> – is found in traditional societies. Examples of such societies were to be found in precolonial sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>5</sup> For these people, who live in traditional agrarian (and pastoral) cultures, there is naturally an awareness linear, chronological time or "concrete time" (Eliade, 1965:21), but "ritual transforms this concrete time into mythic time" (Eliade, 1965:21). "Primitive" being becomes ontologically "real only when it repeats an archetype" (Eliade, 1965:20).

Eliade, of course, is far from unique in his conception of sacred, mythic time and secular chronological time. James Frazer in his *The golden bough* (1890) had already made a distinction between the sacred time of "primitive" societies and Western time, but he regarded the former as merely "childish" (Mathuray, 2009:6). Emile Durkheim develops the differing concepts of time into sacred and profane duration in which he argues that traditional humanity elevated the former and delegated the latter to "the world of economic production" (Mathuray, 2009:8). It was Eliade who developed this line of thought and made it central to his academic writing. Most succinctly,

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3 We have modernised Eliade's (1965:149-151) list of "historicists". For Jean Paul Sartre (1948:98-100), existence, and hence history has no intrinsic meaning: humanity must exercise its intrinsic freedom and choose its being by authentic acts. Jacques Derrida (1972:248) also objects to meaning obtained by means of a transcendent "metaphysics of presence" which gives a text (or history) a reference outside of itself, "a fixed form".

4 Berger (1985:324-25) makes this point concerning the divergence of the West and traditional societies both in relation to the individual's sense of identity and time.

5 We are also from this point onwards, reliant on Mbiti's (1990) sense of sub-Saharan societies.

it is to be found in his book, *The myth of the eternal return* (Eliade, 1965). His work has not been unchallenged, however, G.S. Kirk (1973:255) has argued that Eliade overextends his theories and valorises traditional humanity and comments, “such extravagances, together with a marked repetitiveness, have made Eliade unpopular with many anthropologists and sociologists”. Nevertheless, Wendy Doniger (Eliade, 2004:xiii) argues in her Foreword to Eliade’s *Shamanism* that Eliade’s theories are still useful as “starting points for the comparative study of religion”.

#### **4. The archetypes of time and history**

For Eliade, “the term archetype ... [is] a synonym for an exemplary model or paradigm” (Eliade, 1965:xv) and he states that he is using the term in a pre-Jungian, Augustinian sense. Yet, Jung’s sense of the archetype, although more psychological in orientation, is compatible with that of Eliade. Jung posits the collective unconscious – as opposed to the individual unconsciousness – common to all mankind. This is essentially the area of the mind which seeks to recreate and resolve typical responses to fundamental human situations. The collective unconsciousness does this by means of archetypes which can be defined as constituting “a predisposition to create significant myths out of the common stuff of day-to-day experience” (Storr, 1973:40) or, “a readiness to produce over and over again the same mythical ideas” (Storr, 1983:70). Mythical narratives and the archetypal images embedded in them can thus be seen as stylised or symbolic expressions of deep human desires. It is this sense of the archetype that will be drawn on in the subsequent discussion.

The rituals which celebrate myths and archetypal productions of traditional societies that transform reality into mythic time can accordingly be regarded as symbolic expressions of their deepest desires. In mythic time, teleology is transcended thus expressing the desire of traditional humanity to avoid the terror of history (Eliade, 1965:76): traditional humanity is thus not exposed to the remorseless unfolding of events in linear time. Mythic time, by not being chained to the implacable causality of linear time, can thus also avoid determinism. Time can in this way be regenerated and redeemed. Ahistorical or mythic time is created when rituals and libations symbolically repeat events by means of archetypal objects, animals or beings, so that people have a circular notion of time as eternal recurrence. History is atemporal because its cyclical repetition allows for continual rene-

wal.<sup>6</sup> These cycles include the "rhythms of night and day ... and the seasons and the cycles of the moon, the solstices" (Eliade, 1965: 95). The moon is particularly important in creating "lunar myths" which are vital in "the organization of the first coherent theories concerning death and resurrection, fertility and regeneration, initiation" (Eliade, 1965:86). If "the moon's phases – long before the solar year, and far more concretely – reveal a unit (the month), the moon at the same time reveals 'the eternal return' ... This eternal return reveals an ontology uncontaminated by time and becoming" (Eliade, 1965:89). Of course, the solar calendar and its ruling archetype, the sun, did come to play an important part in cyclical concepts of time for it governed the rituals of planting, maturation and harvesting of crops. Similarly, heroic individuals could, in the cycles of their lives, become archetypal symbols of mythic time (Eliade, 1965:42-44).

In *Modjadji*, apart from the figure of Modjadji herself, it is principally night and day, the moon, the sun and harvest festivals that bear the burden of the archetypes of time for these symbolically enact the eternal recurrence that allows the limitations of mortality to be overcome.<sup>7</sup> They acquire their symbolic significance by means of repetition for they appear like leitmotifs throughout the play. Indeed, the whole play is about the passage of time, mortality and the benefits accruing to people whose ruler has broken away from the terrors of linear history.

The narrative of the play itself breaks away from linear history. The history of the Modjadji – all the rain-making queens of Lobedu – begins in 1589 after the death of the Mwenemotapa, Mpuzungutu – the ruler of the huge South East African empire of Monomotapa. One of his sons, had a daughter, Dzugudini, who, with some followers fled southwards from her father after she gave birth to an illegitimate son (Axelson, 1973:146-47). She carried her father's rain-charms with her and settled in what is now part of the eastern part of the Limpopo province. After more than two centuries of rule by

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6 In a manner similar to the ahistorical, non-linear concept of time, Jung (1936:144-45) maintains that traditional societies adopt a sense of causality that eschews linear, naturalistic logic, but gives priority to supernatural agents of cause and effect. Thus, in the experience of traditional people there is another area of epistemology that denies Western thought.

7 Mbiti (1990) maintains that in traditional societies, the moon and its lunar month are the most important measure of time, but he also acknowledges the solar year, especially as it governs planting and harvesting, as being of great importance.

kings, the rule of queens or Modjadjis is established by Modjadji I (ruled 1800-1854). She fosters the idea, at least to foreigners, that she is immortal and her people look up on her as the embodiment of divine order (Krige, 1943:5-12).<sup>8</sup> She was succeeded by Modjadji II (ruled 1854-1895), Modjadji III (ruled 1896-1959) and her successors to the present-day. The power and prestige of the Modjadji have remained so great that, in the rule of Modjadji V (ruled 1980-2001), even Nelson Mandela, on his campaign trail of 1994 had to make special arrangements and endure considerable difficulties to gain an audience (Barron, 2005:215).

Little of the above-mentioned historical data is mentioned in *Modjadji*. The play's Modjadji has general attributes such as the historical Modjadjis' mystery, seclusion, rain-making skills, the wealth these bring and her ability to protect her people in times of war, but her location in time is indefinite. Even the names of the characters in the play except for the eponymous Modjadji herself, are fictional. This lack of historicism must be intentional as Franz lived many years among the Lobedu. Franz seems to be creating a mythical world untied to everyday historical limitations, deliberately. Some of the ideas of the most famous and all-embracing literary myth critic, Northrop Frye, are helpful in this respect.

For Frye, all literature, in various ways, expresses the myths that are directly present in ancient writing such as the Greek dramas. As literature in modern times has increasingly attempted to express everyday reality, these myths have become transformed or "displaced" to accommodate the requirements of plausibility or verisimilitude (Frye, 1957:136-137). *Modjadji*, with its ahistoricism, the divine ancestors, and Modjadji's quest for power and immortality, is obviously not written in a realistic or naturalistic style, but harks back to the mythic mode of writing in order to express directly, without displacement, one of humanity's deepest desires. Myth here is not so much a product of the individual unconscious, but of the collective unconscious, because Modjadji's desires are so universal as to be archetypes. Here the play contradicts Georg Luckács' dictum that the historical novel (and implicitly, drama) should be realistic in order to make concrete "the necessity and inevitability of historical development" (Mensah, 1996:69). However, Mensah (1996:70) ar-

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8 The qualities are emphasised by the character She in Rider Haggard's *She*. Such was the fame and mystery of Modjadji that he based his fictional character on her whom he had heard of during his stay in the Boer republic of the Transvaal during the early 1880s (Etherington, 1991:xxiv).

gues that African historical writing need not be narrowly realistic and can include mythical elements in order to more accurately reflect the African experience. It is actually because little attention is given to historical accuracy and the exigencies of daily life that the archetypal imagery embedded in myth can illuminate the narrative so directly and openly. In *Modjadji*, the sense of history is attenuated in favour of the archetypes of time, because the aim of the play is not to express "the inevitability of historical development", but to transcend it.

## 5. Interpretative analysis of *Modjadji*

The opening of the play is set in a gorge in the mountains (Act 1, scene 1). In the background is a cave. In the foreground is a rock slab with potholes in it where the living offer libations to their divine ancestors, sometimes simply known as gods.<sup>9</sup> As a place of communion with divinities, this is a holy place. Mountains, caves and holes are traditionally regarded as dwelling places of ancestors and divinities (Mbiti, 1990:55). This immediately elevates the opening setting of the play to the realm of myth. What happens here is of archetypal importance. The setting implies that we are in an age that is fully traditional – untouched by Western influences.

Furthermore, when Modjadji, aged twenty, appears, she is accompanied by a traditional healer, Mmadsiri, dressed in traditional regalia. Modjadji is also following a ritual in offering a traditional libation of beer to the ancestors which she places in the potholes. The play's central concern of overcoming the irreversible passage of time and the determinism of linear history by means of immortality is almost immediately introduced in the two women's conversation when we hear that Modjadji has come to implore the ancestors that she be granted everlasting life and, concomitantly, sovereignty over her people, so that she may protect them with her powers. While advising the young woman on the way in which to approach the divine ones, Mmadsiri prominently introduces the concept that "life is circular" when she says:

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9 The exact ontological nature of the ancestors is problematic. Ashforth (2005:97-98) discusses whether they are worshipped, venerated or merely respected, each attitude implying a different status. While he acknowledges differences in geography and time, he maintains that for people such as the Sotho (and implicitly the Lobedu), in the past, the ancestors were worshipped as god or demi-gods, whereas now, in the rural areas, the tendency is towards veneration. In the urban areas, the trend is towards deep respect. However, there is great flexibility, as has been reflected in this article.



Bona, a ke re motho o ne mahlo a mabedi, ditsebe tše pedi, matsogo a mabedi, maoto a mabedi ... Bjale ge, ge a biletšwa faseng le lengwe, mmele wa gagwe o arolwa go tloga godimo go ya fase . Tšohle tša letsogo le letshadi di šala lefaseng leno, tšohle tša le letona di ya faseng lešele kua ngweding ... ge ngwedi o tletše, mme bošigong bjoo fela tona e tla go tshadi, mme ke motho gape (Franz, 1957:4).

*Remember that a person has two eyes, two hands two legs ... Therefore, when she/he is called to the other world his/her body is split from the top to the bottom [divided in two parts]. All the body parts on the left side remain in this world while all the body parts on the right side depart to the moon, which is the other world ... at full moon the male, which is the right-hand side, comes to the female, which is the left-hand side, and they become a person once more.*

Here, in highly-charged, dense metaphorical language, Mmadsiri conveys a sense that the human life-cycle involves birth, death, and entering a life hereafter, in which the person is split in two, with the feminine aspect of the individual remaining on earth while the masculine aspect resides in the moon, a symbol for heaven. On the night of the full moon, the masculine half descends to earth and each interpenetrate each other to form a fully integrated human entity.

Implicitly, the cycle of the moon corresponds with the cycle of human life. People are born, they die and at the full moon they return to life. Because the lunar cycle repeats itself ad infinitum, the cycles of human life are also never-ending. In this there is a form of immortality and accordingly the moon – especially the full moon – becomes associated with life that goes beyond the tribulations of mundane mortality bound to history. Here, the moon as an archetype of time, is given priority in the play, because it is the first archetype to be mentioned and at considerable length. This fits in well with Eliade's previously-mentioned stress on the central role that the lunar cycle has in organising theories of death and resurrection and establishing "eternal return", which in itself reveals an ontology uncontaminated by time and becoming.

Thereafter, Mmadsiri departs and the ancestors arrive. Presently, they discuss Modjadji's supplications. Before her wishes for immortality and sovereignty are granted, some important qualifications arise. A male ancestor argues (Franz, 1957:9):

Pušo yona a ka e hwetša, le bophelo bjo bo sa feleng Eupša  
ngwana wa motho a ga a tsebe gare mo lefaseng leno ga go  
thlalano gare ga motho le botšofadi na?

*Sovereignty she can get, as well as everlasting life. But does  
the child of man not know that in this world a human being  
cannot be divorced from aging?*

It would appear the divine ones cannot radically change the human condition and that their gift of "eternal life" has its limitations. A female ancestor adds a further dimension to the problem of eternal life when she says: "Mme o fetoga mm'ago bodutu" (Franz, 1957:9). ("Then she becomes the mother of solitude".) Apparently one problem of immortality or longevity is that one will become isolated and suffer loneliness because friends and relatives will die. They leave Modjadji to solve the problem by herself when one says: "Mo nee yona re bone seo a tlo'go se dira" (Franz, 1957:10). ("Give it to her, let us see what she will do with it.")

Modjadji exultantly greets her new life in archetypal imagery (Franz, 1957:10): "Aoa, go sele. Etna tšatši la pušo ya ka. Etna bophelo bjo bo sa felego". ("O, it is dawn. Come day of my power. Come eternal life.") Apart from the archetypal reference to the diurnal cycle, the solemnity of her sentiments is emphasised by her rhetoric: short repetitive sentences lend themselves to a declamatory mode of utterance, enhancing the sense of excitement and energy. With ritualistic formality, she goes on to fuse time into one (Franz, 1957:10):

Ge e le nna ke nako-jeno gomme ke tla ba nako-ile ke e ya ...  
Nako tlaa ke tlaa o etla ... Nna ke tla ba fetafetile ... Eupša di  
tlang di tswala ke di leng teng ... ka gona ke tla ba motswa-  
laditlaa ..., mmagoditlaa.

*I am the present and I will be the past moving forward ... The  
future is to come ... I will the past of the past ... The future is  
born of the present ... therefore I will be the womb of all the  
futures ..., the mother of the futures.*

Modjadji's incantation, created by the repetitious references to various forms of time, recalls the epigraph by Eliot: "Time present and time past / Are both perhaps present in time future / And time future contain in time past" (Eliot, 1963:189). If the present is in the past and both the present and the past are in the future, then time present, past and future meld into one being – Modjadji. Eliot continues: "all time is eternally present" (Eliot, 1963:189). Here, like Modjadji, "Eliot weaves out a riddling maze of various times each

'present in' all the others" (Reibetaus, 1980:23). When his sentiments are applied to Franz's drama, the implication arises that Modjadji will live in an eternal present. With the words "pass on", she also begins to acknowledge that her immortality will have its limits. As all time is the same for her, however, she stands above the linearity of past, present and future, even while she is living within time; therefore, she need not fear the "terror of history". She closes her monologue with oratory which, by means of short repetitive sentences, creates a rhythmic crescendo that culminates in self-affirmation (Franz, 1957:10): "Gake motho fela ... Ga ke modimo fela ... ke motho-modimo ... ke Modjadji". ("I am not an ordinary person. I am not an ordinary holy one. I am a human holy one. I am Modjadji.")

She may have her limitations, but with her union of humanity and divinity, she is ontologically a new being. She is Modjadji. She is unique. She has begun to resolve her fate. It seems likely that with these statements she is beginning to change from the young woman of twenty, named Modjadji, to the queen whose title is Modjadji.

After Modjadji's paean celebrating her new being, she settles down to establish her reign among her people (Act 1, scene 2). In archetypal images of power drawn from the animal kingdom, she is addressed by her former mentor, Mmadsiri (who better than anyone should know of changes manifested by her new power), as *Tlou* (Elephant), *Nare* (Buffalo) and *Tau* (Lion). She is also associated with the archetypal images of eternal recurrence: the sun and the moon. These associations also imbue her with a sense of power because, as the previously mentioned animals dominate their natural world, the celestial bodies dominate the cycles of day and night. Another example of her newfound power is that she now becomes a rainmaker of supreme importance.

Her positions of monarch and rainmaker do not simply involve earthly authority, but as befitting to a human god, they also embrace sacral dimensions. Of sub-Saharan African rulers, Mbiti (1990:177) says:

... they are not simply political heads: they are the mystical and religious heads, the divine symbol of their people's health and welfare ... their office is the link between human rule and spiritual government. They are therefore, divine or sacral rulers, the shadow or reflection of God's rule in the universe.

As regards rainmakers, he adds:

Rain has a deeply religious rhythm, and those who 'deal' in it, transact business of the highest religious calibre. Rain is the manifestation of the eternal, in the here and now.

Rain makers not only solicit physical rain, but symbolize man's contact with the blessings of time and eternity. (Mbiti, 1990:177.)

The sacral aspects of her two roles imply she is also high priest of her nation. As Mbiti (1990:188) points out, she stands as the "chief intermediary ... between God, or divinity, and men".

With such physical and spiritual powers at her disposal, she decides to establish a new kingdom for her people. Significantly, she decides to tell the divine ancestors of her plans at the numinous time of full moon. Many nations will come to her in supplication for rain. This will not only enrich her tribe, but as part of their tribute, they will give her women who will then become her "wives". These, in turn, will attract soldiers who will defend her realm and be fathers to the new nation.

Act 2 opens twenty years after the beginning of the play, when Modjadji herself was twenty, thus establishing a cycle of twenty years within the play, which presumably refers to the recurrence of human generations, as will be argued later. This act is largely devoted to a display of the benevolent aspects of her faculties. She becomes a peacemaker among her people and between nations. She is a maternal protector against all kinds of depredations. Again, she is the sun and the moon. She is *tsebedimo* (the ear of God); she is *leihlokoma* (the eye of Koma – the initiated). Above all, she is referred to in tones of awe as the *mothodimo* (the human god).

The act concludes (Act 2, scene 5) in a discussion with Malome (generically, "uncle"), about her plans to extend her longevity so that she may appear to be a human god indeed. Modjadji picks up on her earlier ruminations on the topic of immortality when she recalls the ancestor's words: "Does the child of man not realize that in this world a human being cannot be divorced from ageing?". She realises that she will grow old and age and people will see her as such, but she recapitulates her sense that her immortality is grounded in the oneness of time because (Franz, 1957:45)

... botho-tho bja gagwe e šetše e le nako-jeno le nako ile, mme bo fetoga nako-tla bo ntše bo e-ya ka gobane nako-tlaa ke ngwana wa nako-jeno le setlogolo sa nako-ile.

*... my immortality is already in the present, and in the past, which is changing continuously into the future because the future is the child of the present and the grandchild of the past.*

The ritualistic incantation is similar to her earlier stylised rhetoric (and that of Eliot), but now we have new emphasis on the life cycle of humanity in the phrase, “the child of the present and the grandchild of the past”. This picks up on the suggestion about the recurrence of human generations made at the beginning of the act. By now, we have heard the repeated invocations of the archetypes of time, so that the ritualistic references to the human life-cycle acquire sufficient symbolic resonances to bring to mind mythological time in which “there is an abolition of [historical] time through the imitation of archetypes and repetition, ritual gestures ..., there is the abolition of profane time” (Eliade, 1965:35).

Referring specifically to myths in literature, Guerin *et al.* (1992:154) maintain that an “archetypal motif ... [is the] mystical submersion into cyclical time: the theme of endless death and regeneration – human beings achieve a type of immortality by submitting to the vast, mysterious rhythm of Nature’s eternal cycle, particularly the cycle of the seasons”. Life exists in an eternal present which is a fusion of all time and a transcendence of history.

Although Modjadji promulgates the notion that life in mythological time with its eternal recurrences is able to transcend history, she cannot entirely abolish profane, historical time from the minds of her people for

[t]he abolition of profane time and the individual’s projection into mythical time do not occur, of course, except at essential periods – those, that is, when the individual is truly himself: on the occasion of ritual or of important acts (alimentation, generation ceremonies, hunting, fishing, war, work). The rest of life is passed in profane time, which is without meaning: in the state of ‘becoming’. (Eliade, 1965:35.)<sup>10</sup>

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10 Jung (1936:151) makes a similar point regarding causality, which is intimately connected with time. For traditional people, “everything is brought about by invisible powers ... Natural causation to [them] is a mere semblance and not worth mentioning”. Traditional humanity, similarly, as in the case of mythic time, is aware of empirical linear causation, but it is regarded as being inferior to supernatural causation because the explanations it provides are superficial according to traditional epistemology.

Although Modjadji's people may not place much emphasis on chronological time, she will by means of the appropriate rituals ensure that in their minds she remains everlasting.

Modjadji, accordingly develops a plan which centres on Ngwetšana, daughter of her official wife. Ngwetšana, who is legally Modjadji's daughter, will replace her as Modjadji when she becomes old and near to death, because she has been chosen for she is her look-alike, not only physically, but spiritually and psychologically as well. Thus, with proper training and initiation into sacramental rituals, she too will develop the power to command the rain, to heal and to guide her people. She ultimately will become the channel of the will of the ancestor-gods. She will have a loving and intimate relationship with her mentor, Modjadji, because of them living in the same environment – she will be like her in terms of character as well as emotional and spiritual nature. Modjadji will imprint her very being on her successor. Moreover, when Modjadji herself becomes an ancestor, she will implicitly live through the consciousness of her daughter. In a very real sense they will be the same. For a traditional culture whose epistemology grants a higher ontological status to a mythic symbol than to quotidian reality, Modjadji will be infused in and become Ngwetšana. Thus, on the mythic and archetypal level, Modjadji will not die but will fulfil the ancestor's promise of life everlasting, because she will be incarnated in her heir.

Further, to ensure the belief that Modjadji never dies, she will withdraw into the sacred cave, which formed part of the background in the opening scene of the play. She will occasionally be seen during ritual ceremonies, but only at a distance, so that changes in her appearance will not be noted.

Some twenty years later, at the age of 60, we find in the opening scene of Act 3, the Modjadji before her holy cave. This time lapse recalls the twenty-year periods between acts one and two, which contain within themselves, the generational cycles of life. The foreground of the stage is taken up with the annual harvest feast, one of the major ceremonies archetypically celebrating the seasonal cycle of the year. The gifts that Modjadji's people bring her are reminiscent of Modjadji's earlier libations in her supplication to the ancestors for everlasting life on the night of the archetypal harvest of the full moon.

When Modjadji appears before the entrance to the cave, the old woman is in full view of her people, but at a distance. Because they cannot see her clearly, she retains the semblance of being the

unchanging rain queen. However, the real test of her everlasting nature will come when people see her at close range. She knows that she will not succeed because she is old, but if her successor, Ngwetšana, does pass as herself, then at least in outward manifestations, she will seem to be immortal. She accordingly calls her army general, Rakoma, to an audience where he can see Ngwetšana clearly. When he arrives, Ngwetšana is seated on Modjadji's throne, dressed in her royal regalia, while the older woman is seated in a lower position beside her. Her "uncle" and chief councillor, Malome, is also present. Rakoma acknowledges the young woman as Modjadji and virtually ignores Modjadji herself. Impressed with his "rain queen", he proclaims (Franz, 1957:50):

Aoa, mahlo aka a bone mehlolo. Bona nna le wena Malome. Re dihlogo-pududu. Le mokgekolo yola o tšofetše ... Lebelela Modjadji, hle. Yena, botšofadi bo a moila. Ngwaga o mongwe le o mongwe o tswalwa ke Naka, oa gola, o a tšofala wa hwa pelegong ya ngwaga wo mofsa. Eupša Modjadji o oka lese la ngwaga, o godiša ngwana ouwe, o felegetša ngwaga botšofading bja wona go fihla lebitleng, mme mo lebitleng o amogela ngwaga wo mofsa ... O ile le nako, oya le nako, o tla nna a eya le nako.

*Truly, my eyes have seen wonders. Look at me and you Malome. Our heads have turned grey. Even that old woman [pointing towards the real Modjadji] has aged ... Please, look at Modjadji [pointing at Ngwetšana]. She does not age. Each year is born of the Naka [the Eastern Star, or planting time], it grows, it ages [harvest time] and it dies at the birth of the new year. But Modjadji is like the new-born year, she nurtures the infant year, she accompanies it as it ages and, at the grave, receives the new year ... She moved with time, she moves with time, she will keep on moving with time.*

As this speech represents the triumph of Modjadji's endeavours, it is fitting that it constitutes what can be seen as the thematic climax of the play. After having expressed wonder at the rain queen's eternal youth, Rakoma evokes the agricultural year, linking it with the seasons and celestial bodies. The ascendancy of the eastern star, Naka, marks the beginning of the growing season; it then signals the harvest, and finally, it dies like the crops in winter. He proceeds to associate the agricultural and seasonal cycles with Modjadji and humanises the turnings of the calendar. As a nurse of the infant year, Modjadji is intimately joined with recurring annual patterns, not simply as an infant, but also as a maternal presence: for she nurtures its youth and oversees its life until old age and death.

Essentially, Modjadji is the divine loving spirit infusing the year, and because "year" is used generically, all years are implied. Finally, there is the abstract assertion that Modjadji is all time, present, past and future united as one, for both time and the human goddess move as one. Moreover, because she moves at the same pace as time, time is stationary for her. She is literally timeless. In Rakoma's speech, he encapsulates preceding notions of time in a synthesis of what is natural, mythic and human. By means of these archetypes, the horrors of history are transcended, because the cycles of time are accepted as a manifestation of that which is eternal.

After Rakoma has made his impassioned, climactic speech of praise, he stands at the door of her audience chamber and exults in a farewell hymn to his rain queen, which in its measured, lyric formality lowers the dramatic tension of the play (Franz, 1957:51):

Thobela, tšatši la Modjadji!  
Thobela mma-mm'ago letšatši!  
Kgwedi e a bola, gwa tswalwa ye mpsha.  
Motho o a tšofala gwa hlaga yo mofsa.  
Se šalang ke letšatši, kobo ya ditšhiwana.  
Letšatši le na le mm'a lona  
Mm'a lona, Modjadji.  
Se sa feleng se a šola,  
Thobela! Thobela!

*Hail, the sun of Modjadji!*  
*Hail, the mother of the mother of the sun!*  
*The moon wanes and a new one is born.*  
*A person ages and then a new one emerges.*  
*What remains is the sun, the comforter of the poor,*  
*The sun has its own mother,*  
*It's Mother Modjadji.*  
*What does not come to an end, is the sun ever as a portent,*  
*Hail! Hail!*

After Rakoma's valedictory salutation, "Hail!", at the beginning of his praise poem, he proceeds in the next two lines to extol the supremacy of Modjadji. It should be noted here that *Modjadji* literally means the sun in the first person singular so that her eponymous title is "I am the sun". Accordingly, the woman before the general is actually the sun of the sun: in the same way that the title king of kings means that the bearer of the honorific outranks other kings, she is greater than even the sun. However, the maternal, feminine side of the rain queen is also invoked in that she is mother to the celestial deity and presumably a nurturing mother goddess figure. In



contrast to the sun, the next line introduces the moon and its lunar cycle of death and life. Extrapolating from nature to humanity, the following line links the lunar cycle of death and birth to humanity's cycle of mortality, for people age and are born. They are also reborn as earlier mentioned by Mmadsiri in her account of the ancestors (Franz, 1957:4).

The rest of the praise poem makes the startling statement that what endures throughout lunar and human frailty is the comforting endlessness of the sun. Yet, this is logical. Because Modjadji is metonymically the sun (albeit in human form because she is a human divinity), she is above humanity as the sun is superior to the moon. Both humanity and the moon have their cycles, but the sun and Modjadji have a duration of existence which transcends even these patterns of life. As such, she can be seen to be the quintessence of the everlasting human spirit. In Rakoma's praise poem Modjadji/the sun can be seen as an archetype of time for the entity they constitute is ascendant over time and history. Ultimately, Modjadji is the human god (mothodimo) or the human spirit that here, in its most elevated expression, has literally – and not only metaphorically – immortal sovereignty.

After the exultation of Rakoma's poem to his sun, the mood of the play subsides quietly to its luminescent end. With the general's departure, Ngwetšana, the substitute Modjadji, brings the action of the play back into the ordinary world by her complaint that she and Modjadji ought not to have deceived Rakoma as to her identity. Modjadji replies patiently (Franz, 1957:51):

Ke go fora motho ge o mo thabiša? ... Go fa ga se go fora, go fora ke go amoga. Batho ka moka ba a tseba gore Modjadji o na le bophelo bjo bo sa feleng ... Ke sona se o mo fileng sona, Ngwetšana, mme o tla khuparetša mpho yeo go fihlela letšatšing la gagwe le le sa fetogeng.

*Is it lying to a person when you make him happy? ... To give is not to lie, to lie is to take away something from someone by force. All people know that Modjadji has everlasting life ... That [knowledge] is what you gave him, Ngetswana, and he is going to cherish that until the moment of his dying day.*

A crucial distinction is made here between literal truth and psychological truth (based on archetypical truth). At this stage, Ngwetšana can only comprehend the literal truth that Rakoma was deceived. Modjadji, however, points out that in the preservation of the myth, the veracity of Modjadji's everlasting life has been psychologically

true for Makoma, because the needs and desires arising from the archetypes of the collective unconsciousness have been fulfilled. On the level of mythic and archetypical experience, the presence of an unchanging Modjadji (whether it is the same woman or not), expresses a temporal continuity which transcends the cycles of individual life. Ironically, without knowing it, Rakoma, in his extreme vision of Modjadji's divinity, is ultimately not deceived and she is not lying, because on one level Ngwetšana *is* Modjadji and the rain queen essentially *does* have everlasting life.

In the final sentence of her speech Modjadji continues (Franz, 1957:52): "Setšhaba se tla bona Modjadji a le kgole. Mme mengwaga e go gata direthe yo mongwe o tla be a tsena legatong la gago". ("The tribe shall see Modjadji from afar. When you grow old [referring to Ngwetšana], another [Modjadji] will replace you.") Thus, someone else will replace Ngwetšana as Modjadji as she will replace the present Modjadji. Implicitly, this successor will be replaced by her own successor *ad infinitum*. Each Modjadji will represent a cycle of human life forming a pattern of eternal recurrence in which ontological and spiritual identity is retained. The rain queen, whether as an individual incarnation or as an eternally recurrent being, is now an archetype of time herself, which can negate the terror of history.

Obviously, Ngwetšana has in the anti-penultimate moments of the play, grasped this concept when she endorses Modjadji's vision regarding her own now-chosen successor, Naletšana (Franz, 1957: 52):

... o wetše tseleng ya go ba letšatšinyana la Modjadji. Ešita le bjalo e šetše e le lehlasedi la Modjadji.

... she [Naletšana] is on track to be Modjadji's sun. Even now she is Modjadji's beam of light.

Ngwetšana here echoes Rakoma's praise poem to his sun, Modjadji, when she uses the pun on the meaning of Modjadji's titular name – I am the sun – to suggest identity with the sun. Naletšana is on track to be sun of the sun: she will be the light of Ngwetšana when she, Ngwetšana, is Modjadji. The older Ngwetšana will be the source of the younger Naletšana's life, as well as all the power and archetypical life-giving properties that are symbolised by the sun.

Ontologically, the two women will be one. Both will be Modjadji. This state of being is a projection into the future. At present, Naletšana has merely been chosen and thus this stage has not been reached.

At present, she is Ngwetšana's "beam of light". As both the sun-beam and the sun are light and light is energy, there is already a nascent sense of identity between the woman about to become Modjadji and her future simulacrum.

The theatrical stage presence of the present Modjadji, the soon-to-become Modjadji, and the virtual presence of the far-future Modjadji (through the medium of Ngwetšana's references to her), means that either directly or indirectly, all three Modjadjis are present to the audience at the end of the play. The representatives of the past, the present and the future are fused into one archetypal being which is removed from the vicissitudes of history. The central concern of the play is thus present by declamation and the spectacle on the stage.

The temporal structure of the play also fuses elements of time into a unifying cycle, for in the final scene the audience is returned to the spectacle of the cave, the mountain and the potholes containing libations to the ancestors. Not surprisingly, it is twenty years later and Modjadji is eighty years old. Another turn of the generations has occurred. It is also full moon, that numinous time when the spiritual and physical worlds interpenetrate. The same three ancestors from the beginning of the play are present, so is Malome, Modjadji's trusted uncle and advisor, who has only recently passed on. The play ends with the old woman performing her libations that unite her with her ancestors, who bring her into the spiritual world so that she is part of both – a human god – existing in time, but also beyond time.

In order more fully to perceive Modjadji's achievement, it would be useful to return to T.S. Eliot's epigraph which, as has been shown, has intertextual resonances with Modjadji's vision of being released from time and history. What was not mentioned in the comparison was that Eliot places a condition on his deterministic statement, "All time is unredeemable", with the words "perhaps" and "if". Thus, in a literal explication we have a conditional proposition: *if* past and present are fused in an eternal present, *then* the present is eternally determined by what happened in the past. Eliot escapes from this deterministic proposition about time and history by means of exploring the high Christian mysticism of St. John of the Cross and the humble Christian mysticism of St. Julian of Norwich (Raine, 2006:96-67, 95-115). His sense of Christian mysticism, however, does not evoke an eschatological teleology, but the attainment of a timeless moment which is both within time and outside of time.

In contrast, Modjadji transcends the deterministic possibilities in the fusion of time by means of the play's deployment of the archetypes of time. The imagery of the moon, the sun, the diurnal cycles of the seasons, and she herself, evoke a sense of eternal recurrence. Recurrence, then, establishes an awareness of everlasting continuity in mythic time, which for traditional humanity is ontologically more real than historical time. Mythic time, in turn, banishes linear time, which irreversibly (and, in extreme cases, deterministically) exposes humanity to the depredations of history. Thus, for Modjadji, time is no longer unredeemable.

## 6. Conclusion

*Modjadji*, with its ahistoricity, offers a somewhat idealised view of the Lobedu rain queen. The historical queens, although powerful, were not above the vicissitudes of traditional customs. In the same way that Franz largely excludes historical events, he also does not include some of the more sombre aspects of Modjadji's life and its accompanying rituals. According to tradition, the rain queen should end her reign by "ritual suicide [which] elevates the queen to a divinity; only by her own act, and not because susceptibilities to the weaknesses of man, can she die" (Krige, 1943:167). The first two Modjadjis did indeed commit suicide, but the third (ruled 1895-1959) did not, because as she approached old age, she was persuaded to desist by Lutheran missionaries (Mampeule, 2000:15). A pernicious traditional practice had been changed, yet the queens retained their power and prestige. *Modjadji* seems to be doing much the same as the missionaries; for it excludes harmful traditions and focuses on those which, for example, manage to capture the cyclical and mythic ways of living time. The past is thus recapitulated, and transformed so that in the present the archetypes of time can allow consciousness to transcend the terrors of history.

The didactic implications of *Modjadji* are further enhanced by the fact that it is a drama that is orally performed with a praise poem as its culmination. Indeed, the whole play can be regarded as a praise poem. Writing about Lobedu praise poetry, the anthropologist, Anniekie Joubert, maintains that the genre is "an internal, culturally reflexive account of the people's own historical experience and interpretation" (Joubert, 2004:450). She is told by a Lobedu interlocutor that "Praise poetry expresses 'the soul and dignity of our people'." (Joubert, 2004:451.)

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**Key concepts:**

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time, conceptions of

**Kernbegrippe:**

Afrikagodsdien  
Lobedu, politieke strukture  
Modjadji, die reënkoningin  
Noord-Sotho letterkunde  
tydsbegrippe