

Reflections of Mbiti's African Temporal Categories in Moshoeshe Le Baruti (Moshesh and the Missionaries)

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ABSTRACT Time among the Africans (Basotho) appears to be a controversial view that is mostly attacked by many translation critics. The conflicting views around African time is whether it is two-dimensional (past and present) or a three-dimensional phenomenon (past, present and future). It is therefore the objective of this study to reflect on African time with a view to illuminate it in its proper perspective. The basic contention that the Basotho time retrogresses from the present to the past distinguishes itself from the argument that the Basotho also involves a future-dimension. The article also reflects the Basotho time as reflective of the life-view and the socio-cultural situation of the Basotho communities. The basic Basotho temporal categories are operationalized to establish the relevance of time to one of the written Sesotho drama texts, namely Khaketla's *Moshoeshe le Baruti* (Moshesh and the Missionaries). This initiative is based on the understanding that drama reflects on reality and perhaps it would best reflect on the philosophy of the Basotho as Africans. Based on the fact that time is a structural element of a literary text, discussions around this research study are based within a structuralist theoretical framework. The results reflect that African time, in this particular text, is divided into three temporal categories. The researcher submits that time in this text characterises itself as significant in building up the unity of the text embedded within which is the establishment and the clarification of the theme. This study presents and also recommends a holistic approach in dealing with the temporal categories underlying the African (Basotho) time.

INTRODUCTION

Mbiti (1969) distinguishes between the *Sasa* period that encompasses the present and the past as well as the *Zamani* period that stands for the "No-time" temporal category as it suggests that there is no future in African time.

Mbiti (1969) argues that, "According to traditional concepts, time is a two-dimensional phenomenon, with a long past, a present and virtually no future. The linear concept of time in Western thought, with an indefinite past, present and infinite future is practically foreign to African thinking."

In this sense, Mbiti (1969) maintains that African time (including the Basotho) has two basic parameters, and as such distinguishes itself as a two-dimensional phenomenon. He contends in support of this temporal categorisation that African time is based on experiential knowledge. Mbiti comes from a school of thought that maintains that time is linked or constituted by events that occurred. In his opinion, the fact that the future events have not as yet taken place, they are reckoned as "No-time". However, Mbiti seems not to be aware of the fact that time among Africans is socialised. Time is associated with every facet of life of an African and not necessarily the occurrence of the natural events only.

Gyekye (1997) reacts against Mbiti's views on African time and suggests that there is in fact a future dimension in African time. This aspect makes the African (Basotho in particular) conception of time to be three-dimensional (past, present and future) in character.

Aim of the Study

The aim of this paper is to reflect on how Mbiti's assumptions relate to this particular Sesotho drama-text, namely Khaketla's *Moshoeshe le Baruti* (Moshesh and the Missionaries) (1947), a Sesotho historical drama text. The researcher has already indicated (as part of the abstract) that drama is assumed to reflect on reality. The idea is therefore to show how Mbiti's temporal categories apply to this drama text. Jafta (1978:10) adds more meaning by relating drama to "reality" although it is not "reality" itself in his contention that "although drama is a mirroring of life, it does not give us the whole picture but a compendium of life."

The researcher is of the opinion that by so doing the article will provide readers with a perspective of the African (the Basotho) conception of time with a view to confirm or refute the Mbiti assumptions. In order to develop an epistemological perspective based on Mbiti's ontological

views on African conception of time, the arguments of other critics are also taken into consideration.

METHODOLOGY

The analysis of the temporal categories in *Moshoeshoe* will be made within Structuralism as the relevant literary theoretical framework. The fact that time serves as one of the structural elements in a drama-text, the theory of structuralism is assumed to be the most relevant to be applied in this work. The theory will presumably be relevant to present meaningful results. Levitt (1971: 1) opines that structuralism concerns itself with the relationship between different parts and whole “to discover the organisation of a literary work, that is, the relatedness of all parts included in the whole, as they are, is the proper subject of structural criticism”.

Moshoeshoe le Baruti (Moshesh and the Missionaries) as one of the earliest historical drama texts is selected to represent other texts in order to establish the relevance of Mbiti’s assumptions to Sesotho drama. It would be too ambitious on the part of the researcher to analyse all the written Sesotho drama-texts within the context of this single study. The researcher then decided to work on only this particular text.

The various instances where time references have been made in *Moshoeshoe le Baruti* (Moshesh and the Missionaries) are randomly selected and discussed in relation to Mbiti’s assumptions. Where there appears a congruency between the extract from the text and Mbiti’s contention itself, it will be recorded as a case that affirms Mbiti’s ontological thesis. Otherwise other instances will be taken to indicate the difference and actually no relevance to Mbiti’s assumptions. The frequency or number of instances that affirms or disconfirm Mbiti’s assumptions are used as part of the observations on which the final conclusions are made in reflecting on Mbiti’s temporal categories in this text. This simply implies that the final conclusions are drawn as being informed by the frequency of instances that confirm or refute Mbiti’s assumptions.

In judging the nature of time that has been applied or referred to in the text, it will be necessary to also consider the reason for the application of time, the effect of time on the nature of actors involved as well as the effects of time in the establishment of the unity of the text. In other

words, time will not only be discussed to give a sense of Mbiti’s assumptions but, of importance, to discuss intra-textual as well as its extra-textual references or the implications thereof.

At this stage, it is worth to mention that Mbiti’s assumptions will be discussed with a particular consideration given to Gyekye’s arguments against those of Mbiti. The reason will simply be to ensure that the article does not generalise in its findings but check also the specific instances which can go as adjacent to Mbiti’s views.

Definition of Concepts

In order to get a broader sense of the use of time in relation to Mbiti’s assumptions, it will be prudent to select and explain the identified concepts (though not exhaustively). The principle that we apply to define the identified concepts is based on the understanding as generated by Mbiti that events signify time. Gunn (1975: 37) talking about time in relation to events, contends that “events are not happenings which are at or in a moment of time; they are happenings which constitute the moment itself. Events are the concrete facts which constitute time”.

The following concepts are defined within the context of Mbiti’s ontological thesis that forms the core of the argument in this article:

Actual Time

It is time that implies events that already took place as well as those that are actually taking place. Within this particular temporal category, reference is made of the past, that is, events that already took place and present being those that are actually taking place as of now.

Potential Time

This particular time implies the second temporal category. It embraces all those events that may happen but not as yet happened. Mbiti opines that ‘events’ such as those are only implied but not as yet happened and therefore do not constitute time. They form the sub-category of “No-time”. This is part of the temporal parameter that would include future events.

Ontological

It merely refers to the study of existence. It will therefore be contextualised within the African origin, culture and traditions.

Epistemology

Abrams (1943) maintains that epistemology refers to the theory of knowledge, especially the study of its validity, methods and scope. It actually motivates our knowledge of African (Basotho) time.

Discussion of the Mbiti Assumptions

Mbiti (1969) treats time among Africans as an ontological phenomenon that pertains to the question of existence or being. He claims that Africans lack the concept of future time. The ontological core of Mbiti's assumptions about time among the Africans is that "to constitute time is to be lived through". In other words, "time is essentially experienced time only". Put simply, Mbiti maintains that Africans reckon time only if they experience or have experienced it. It therefore implies that they would not have any experience of the future as it presupposes events that are still not yet experienced. Mbiti even suggests that the current state of affairs in the life of Africans is based on their experience of the present as based or rooted on the past.

Some of the aspects of time suggested by Mbiti in motivating the two-dimensional pattern of African (Basotho) time involve the following views:

That characters create time. Characters in an African sense are not actually governed by time as they are said to create time themselves.

That sometimes characters are governed by time. The modern characters (under Krotz and Kolbe) conform to linear time that moves from one point to the other.

That the past has an effect on the present. This is where retrogressive movement of time comes into picture. The verification and authentication of the present time is by going back to the past for the sake of reference.

There is no reference to the future.

A critical account of this assumption is that there are other dimensions that characterise the Africans as having an idea of the future even though they do not put more emphasis on the future. In other words, the Africans lack 'time-discipline' but it does not necessarily mean that they do not have a sense of the future. Furthermore, it can be construed that Mbiti is of the opinion that time among the Basotho within the Sesotho society reflects their lifestyle, traditions, culture, norms and values.

APPLICATION IN MOSHOESHOE LE BARUTI (MOSHESH AND THE MISSIONARIES)

As indicated in the method to be applied, the *text Moshoeshoe le Baruti* (Moshesh and the Missionaries) will be analysed for the purpose. This is a historical drama, (classified as such by Van der Poll (1981: 1)) about the arrival of the missionaries in Lesotho. This is the first historical drama written in Sesotho. It is ideal for the benefit of the relevance and the discussions in this work to focus on a text that entails a historical content as it would perhaps have a lot of reference to time.

As a historical drama text, it is presumably based on the truth of correspondence; that is, the content in such a text would be expected to correspond with the facts of life. It is therefore imperative to apply this literary text in this case as it would both reflect the truth of correspondence as well as the truth of coherence (in terms of its structural relationship of its textual elements) regarding the presentation of African (Basotho) time.

Characters Create Time or Are Governed By Time

As part of the instructions given to the producer (didascalies), it has been specified that:

Act 1: Scene 5

Page 8: *Kgotla. Letsatsi le hlahlamela dithaba.* (At court. The sun is setting.)

The following impressions can be drawn from the above-mentioned assertion or time specification in the stage direction:

that characters could be said to create time following the stage direction, in the sense that it was traditional to hold the *kgotla* (court) in the morning hours and not in the afternoon. This implies that a specific event had been used to create time communicable among the Sesotho speaking people. This view is even supported by Mokgokong (1980: 192) even though he refers to Sepedi-speaking people that, "The traditional concept of time of the Northern-Sotho speaking people, as of most of the African people, is intimately bound up with the entire culture of the people."

We realise that time is employed in this case to signify the norms and traditions of the Basotho as African people.

The time indicator, *letsatsi le hlahlamela dithaba* (the sun is setting) could have been used in order to explain further that it was not in the morning but in the afternoon when the sun was beginning to set; The researcher also notices that a phenomenon or a specific event, *letsatsi le hlahlamela dithaba* (the sun is setting) had been used to signify time. In other words, it is out of personal formulation or interest on the part of the Sesotho speakers that there had been such an indication of time, hence Mbiti reckons time therefore to be created.

It is obvious at this stage that the actual time specified here is the present or the here-and-now. The event of the setting of the sun is merely employed to specify a particular time within the same day.

Characters are Governed by Time

The focus in this particular case will be to check whether there are some instances where characters indicate their concern over the passing or the lapse of time.

Kolbe's wife displays an awareness in the passing of time in her remark that:

Act 3: Scene 1

Page 38: Mosadi (Kolbe): *Efela e se e le bosiu ha e se e le hora ya borobong tjena.*

Kolbe's wife: (It is indeed very late as it is already nine o'clock.)

In analysing the above-mentioned statement by Kolbe's wife; the following points can be stated:

It becomes crystal clear that here the character reflects the fact that there could have been development in how far characters experience time unlike in the past, as she indicates the significance of time in their lifestyles;

The specification of time in this particular is in fact necessary in the sense that it reflects on time of events and provides more meaning why other events in the scene could be possible.

It appears at this stage that the modernist characters (under Krotz and Kolbe) in this text pursue a linear time. Linear time is associated with the movement of time from one point to the other.

Comment

If one focuses on whether characters create or are governed by time, one can actually distin-

guish between two groups of characters. These are the traditionalists, namely Moshesh and his group; and the modernists, namely, the missionaries, including the Griquas. These groups can be categorised as such because:

- a) the traditionalists do not seem to be concerned about the passing of time. They are typically conservative in terms of the use of their social time. There are very few instances (almost none) where they question when the events will happen (any reference to the future). They distinguish themselves therefore as creating time,
- b) the modernists are consistently concerned with what the future holds for them. This point emanates itself through their concern for what event(s) will happen and when they will actually take place (events in future).

Reference to the Future

The following examples derived from this text are indicative of the fact that characters in this text are conscious of the future and their operations within their relationship are also future-oriented:

Act 2: Scene 3

Page 27: Rampai: *Ha le eso kgolwe hore ke tseba ditaola ee! Feela a re tholeng, le tla mpotsa.*

Rampai: (Are you not yet convinced that I know the knuckle bones! However, you will learn more from me.)

The author presents here a fore-shadowing of the forth-coming event. This is indicative of the fact that characters are conscious of the future as suggested by the event that is due to take place. Seeing that the outcome was such that Rampai managed to convince his men that he was a skilled and talented power-doctor, it was quite relevant for him to mention that *le tla mpotsa* (you will ask me) because such a remark (time speculation) builds on suspense on the part of the characters and generates more interest on the part of the readers or the audience. We realise a shift of focus in as far as time is concerned.

In his letter to Kolbe, Lemue specifies categorically when (day) he would come and the time (hour). This particular remark is significant to show that not all characters in a text can be categorised as modernists or traditionalists. Seeing that the text involves the two groups of

characters, it appears that the mode of experience of time among the characters in the two groups cannot be the same.

We should not lose sight of the fact that with the modernist characters, the future is implied. The specificity of time suggests a linear pattern of time.

Act 3: Scene 4

Page 47: Lemue: *Monghadi! Ke tla tla ba teng moo ho wena ka veke e tlang, ka Labobedi ... o ntebelle ka Labobedi, mahareng a hora ya botshelela le ya bosupa, mantsiboya.*

Lemue: (I will arrive next week on Tuesday ... please expect me on Tuesday between six o'clock and seven o'clock in the afternoon.).

Moshesh, the king of the Basotho, also identified himself as future-orientated as he planned or the improvement or future changes in his society. His plans for his nation were actually intended for the future and not necessarily for the here-and-now. This particular idea can be conceived in the following remark:

Act 1: Scene 5

Page 19: Moshoeshoe: *Na ekaba le ke ke la ya fihlisa molaetsa wa ka ho bona hore ba nthomelle e mong, kapa ba bang ba bona, ho tla ruta le ho hlalefisa setjhaba sa ka; haholo ho re tlisetsa kgotso, hobane ke yona eo re e lebellang haholo?*

Moshesh: (Could you be so kind as to convey my message to them that they should send me one or more missionaries to come and educate my people; more especially to bring about peace as it is this that we are opting or 'crying' for?).

Reference to the Present or the Here-and-Now

Moshesh remarks that

Act 2: Scene 4

Page 29: *Tjhaba sa Peete le Mokhachane, ke ka maswabi a maholo ha ke boetse ke le kgobokantse mona hape kajeno.*

(The people of Peete and Mokhachane, it is with great regret that today you should be assembled here one more time.).

The use of *ke boetse ke le kgobokantse* (have decided to bring you all together) suggests that

this event does occur for the first time. This implies that it is repeated. It therefore implies that the event happened in the past and it is then repeated and it then occurs as the present or the here-and-now. It actually refers to the scenario when the Hottentots conquered the cattle from the Basotho people.

This remark is again indicative of the existing situation in Lesotho and, among others, the consistent intention of Moshesh to attain peace for his people.

This has been used as a lesson on its own; that one needs to persevere before attaining success throughout one's activities in life.

Comment

Time reference used has an immense effect in the relationship between the story time (acted time) and the time of performance (acting time) in the sense that

- where anticipations or prospectations had been used, acting time became shorter than the story time or acted time;
- where flashbacks or retrospections had been used, the story time (acted time) became longer than the acting time.

the time indicators had been significantly used to promote the unity of the text and to create a meaningful whole.

Reference to Frequency as a Mode of Time

Act 1: Scene 1

Page 2: Mohale: *Ke hore o re ke ye ke tene mese ha ntwala e le teng? ...*

Ha se wena ya tsebang hore na ha ke kene banneng ke ye ke etse jwang?

Mohale: (Do you say that I usually wear dresses during fights? Is that not you who knows what I normally do when confronted by men?).

Frequency has been used to signify the common practices of the Basotho people during the fights and also demonstrates their attitude towards fights.

In the same breath, Khaketla uses another example that signifies the use of frequency as follows;

Act 1: Scene 4

Page 7: Krotz: *Ke utlwile o bolela lebitso la morena eo ke hlolang ke utlwa a bolelwa, na ke yona naha ya hae yee?*

Krotz: (I heard you mention the name of the king whom I usually hear people talking about. Is this his land?).

It then appears that Krotz and his group were conscious of frequency of occurrence of events as one possible time aspect in their life. It is for that purpose that we would try to establish whether the Basotho were conscious of the contrast between the present and the frequency in their experience of time.

Contrast between Present and Frequency

Act 2: Scene 1

Moshoeshoe: *Pitso ya kajeno lena ha se e tshwanang le tse ding tseo re nneng re be le tsona, ka hobane ha re a tla rera ho futuhela ha Kobo, kapa Maphotong, kapa hona ho ya hapa dikgomo tsa Matebele, ...*

Moshesh: (Today's meeting is very unusual to those previously held because we are not going to plan our strategy to attack either the people of Kobo or the Pondos or else conquer the cattle from the Ndebeles, ...).

Comment

The time indicator *ya kajeno* (today's) has been used to contrast with *tseo re nneng re be le tsona* (previously held). The uniqueness of today's meeting is emphasised in order to emphasise on the importance of the issues that would be discussed on that particular day. The contrast is implied in the sense that the issues under agenda for today's meeting would not be the same as those common issues that are always discussed in such meetings.

The Effects of the Past on the Present

The traditional characters seem to experience the past in the present as they pattern their lifestyles according to what their ancestors predetermined for them. This view is captured in the statement made by Posholi that:

Act 1: Scene 1

Page 1: *Badimo ba rona ba hloname, ba re tima pula, hobane ha re sa phethisa ditshwanelo tsa rona.*

(Our forefathers are angry at us and deny us the rain because we do not perform our cultural rites.).

The fact that characters rely on their *badimo* (ancestors) in their everyday life, is indicative of the role played by thoughts of the past. These characters can therefore be classified as *types*. We also realise that these characters are non-developing in terms of their predetermined life-styles.

RESULTS

Mbiti's perception that Africans apply a dual mode or time, namely a long past and present, as well as an empty slot that could be referred as "No-time" does not prove itself to be relevant in this text.

The analysis of the temporal categories in Moshoeshoe le Baruti (Moshesh and the Missionaries) reflects that there is a variety of temporal categories that are applied in his text. There are instances derived from the text that reflect the present, past as well as future. In some instances, events happen frequently.

Among the traditionalist characters, time appears to be determined on the basis of events. This implies that such characters could be described as either phenomenologists or realists. This view is based on the understanding that time is based on experience. In other words, if something has not been experienced, then it is therefore not allocated any specific time.

Within the context of this particular text (Moshoeshoe), it appears that the traditional characters under the leadership of Moshoeshoe are not necessarily conforming to Mbiti's assumptions as they model their *presence* with the *past* in preparing for the *future*. Most of the examples used in the analysis confirm Gyekye's (1995) basic view (as opposed to Mbiti) that African conception of time is three-dimensional as embedding the *past*, the *present* and the *future*. Gbadegesin (1991) maintains that Mbiti's thesis is merely "a report of a communal world-view without an attempt to evaluate it.

According to Mbiti's African ontological perceptions, African people have the capacity to make time. However, characters in this text do not necessarily make time but are, as in the case of the modernist characters, governed by time. They are fully conscious of the fact that time elapse even though they are not so consistent to work according to time constraints or a specific schedule.

A critical account of this assumption is that there are other dimensions that characterises the

Africans as having an idea of the future even though they do not put more emphasis on the future. In other words, the Africans lack 'time-discipline' but it does not necessarily mean that they do not have a sense of the future and especially the lapse of time.

It is obvious as part of the observed results that time in this text typifies characters as transitional. In other words, they are in the process of transforming from typical traditionalism to modernism. This observation is supported by the fact that the text involves the influence of the modernists under Krotz as well as the traditional Africans under Moshesh. We can even emphasise at this stage that the characters so referred to as traditional, are not typically traditional, but also display the traits of the modern aspects or categories of time.

DISCUSSION

In discussing the observations regarding the temporal categories in this text, we realise that most of the examples discussed refute Mbiti's view. This is reflected in dialogue as well as didascalies in this text. To a very large extent, the manner in which characters experience time in this text appears to confirm Gyekye's (1997) assumptions as time conception appears to be three-dimensional among those characters. Of importance to note again is the fact that time is experienced as linear and future-orientated.

It is also worth-noting that there is a variation in terms of time as signifying the events, occasions and phenomena. This suggests a shift in the life-view of the characters as in this text we find a combination of traditionalist characters (under Moshesh) as well as those modernists (under Krotz and Kolbe). As part of an extra-textual reference, the mode of experience of time in this text suggests transition among the Basotho as being influenced by the Western mode of living (especially the experience of time).

Seen from the perspective of a contemporary African drama, *Moshoeshoe le Baruti* identifies itself as a transitional drama. Dialogue and actions in this drama-text appears to be unified (as ensured by the use of time) and functional towards the development of the theme. Mutwa (1987) is of the opinion that culture is the cornerstone in the classification and description of societies. It is for this reason that in promoting the unity of the text (due to the experience of

time) as seen from the point of view of a Western drama, *Moshoeshoe le Baruti* may be criticised as failing to maintain coherence. This is so because it is perceived from a different cultural background. Pretorius (1982: 24) takes it further by stipulating that this shortcoming can even affect the stageability of drama as he contends that:

"Many dramas in the African languages (especially Sesotho) cannot be staged as the action moves rapidly from one place to another."

Seen from its African (Sesotho) cultural context, a Sesotho drama may be perceived to be unstageable. This may be so as it is judged against the Western standards and somehow analysed from a foreign cultural context. However, the article determines that Sesotho dramas and *Moshoeshoe le Baruti* (in particular) are stageable as stageability merely implies the creation of an illusion as a sign of conviction on the part of the listeners, readers or viewers.

CONCLUSION

Though some of Mbiti's assumptions are relevant to some of the actors in *Moshoeshoe le Baruti*, there are those other actors that really show that there had been an influence of Western to African epistemology. The influence was based on the understanding that knowledge among Africans is based on shared social dimension of a collective majority of citizens within a particular society.

Drama serves as "society in miniature" as it reflects on life as depicted in a real life situation. Time as a structural element signifies the tradition, values and norms of the actors in *Moshoeshoe le Baruti* and reinforces the relationships among those actors. It then become crystal clear that largely the text involves a pair of characters, namely, traditionalists and modernists who maintain different approaches and philosophy of life in terms of how they experience time.

In its uniqueness, African (Basotho) time as reflected in the text *Moshoeshoe le Baruti*, characterises itself as *cyclic* (where it hinges on events) and sometimes it appears to be *linear* (as being mathematically determined). We can then conclude that it involves a continuum and a combination of time as based on events and also time based on movement in a linear structure and moving from one point to another. This is the

reason we conclude that the experience of time in this particular text manifests itself as transitional as it encompass both patterns of *two-dimensional* as regulated by the Basotho culture and *three-dimensional* as being responsive to the Western temporal influences.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is important that time among the Basotho should be viewed holistically. This implies that literary critics should try to look at it broadly than they think it applies in Sesotho literature. The Basotho people as other social groups also experience time according to their social needs and therefore time in Basotho culture should be understood within the context of their social experience within the areas in which they find themselves.

The perception that the Basotho are not sensitive to time is a fallacy that cannot be verified. There is a paradigm shift in the manner in which the traditional Basotho experienced time and how the modern Basotho people experience time and this has affected the experience of time among the Basotho.

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