

Revitalization of Imagery through Proverbs: The Case of Northern Sotho Language in South Africa

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ABSTRACT Proverbs, as part of folklore, include traditions, customs, beliefs, superstitions and legends of ancient people living today. They form a source in which the African people in general, including the Northern Sotho people in particular, can find the general rules which have full authority over human culture. This implies that they form part of human behaviour. Since they are used in different situations to match the particular needs, they must be understood in their context as they portray the actual life of the Northern Sotho people. The main aim of this paper is to ensure that people fit into the dictates of their own cultural environment, besides satisfying their needs as individuals. The principal observation is that since proverbs express the human monument, the basic human nature has not really changed. The individual's survival depends on the community.

INTRODUCTION

Proverbs are still relevant to modern thinking. The modern people still believe that their proverbs satisfy the demands of their developing society. They form the culture of the people of the same group. They govern man's life from childhood to the burial ground. They have the capacity and ability to do what have been done by ancient people. The world of proverbs is a starting point of historical development and constant change. History proves that the capacity and ability are seeds of transmission and are, therefore, inherent factors. Mutasa (1994:156) acknowledges that "with regard to their usage, proverbs are still a day-to-day activity". Through their observation process, their modern thinking forms the logical transmission from the bottom of the top levels of thought. Many stories about the life of the people and the explanations by the proverbs are helpful in evaluating their world view, and the problems of the people living through a period of cultural transition.

METHODOLOGY

The data collected was obtained by means of personal observation of traditional gatherings at Dikgading Village where the use of proverbs is rife. All men and women are considered to be capable and are entitled to participate in the execution of the different activities of the

tribe and of the corporate groups to which they belong, including the judicial activities. The data-gathering method was conducted as the researcher was seated in the background, participating in the proceedings and observing what was happening. The Northern Sotho people have various grades of traditional gatherings corresponding to the structure of their political organization. A formal gathering whose decisions are legally binding is referred to as *lekgotla* (a council). The researcher listened to the use of the proverbs in the social settings which include the formal and non-formal situations.

In-depth interviews were also conducted with ten Northern Sotho speakers (five men and five women). All informants are first language speakers born in the area where language is spoken. They were not grouped according to their background, education or social status. The focus was on the status and the use of the proverbs in their language as well as the speakers' attitudes to them. As a member of the same speech community, the researcher did not find any problems in accumulating data for analysis.

RESULTS

Proverbs are part of the oral forms that were and are used to mould and direct perception and consciousness of the people. This implies that they are used on various experiences as a means of social control. They strengthen family struc-

tures, communities and nations to which they belong. They encourage people to live together in unity. How good and pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! (Psalms 133: 1). This paper is poised at discovering dynamism of culture through the use of proverbs. Dynamism, according to the definition of Toelken (2014: 35), is an aspect comprising all those elements that function to change features, contents, meanings, styles, performance and usage as a particular traditional event takes place repeatedly through space and time. The proverbs freeze wisdom for the benefit of future generations. All of them convey the Northern Sotho people's world view. This means that these expressions reflect influences from the Northern Sotho language, cultural values, myths and moral tradition. Arua (1998: 40) also expresses that these expressions are used to express a people's culture - a way of living, of knowing, of appreciating, of speaking and of doing things generally. Proverbs prevent tension created by the clash of interests of an individual against those of a community. An individual should, therefore, try to fit into the dictates of his/her own cultural environment, besides satisfying his/her needs. Failure to achieve this deal may lead to the alienation of an individual from society. Such an individual consequently develops and harbours resentment which strains his/her bond with the other members of society leading to a feeling of rejection and bitterness.

DISCUSSION

Proverbs are helpful in a culturally mixed area. The cultural morals which they convey reflect the way of life. It becomes clear that every new generation of 'cultural bearers' is unlikely to alter culture which had been handed down to it even though every person may work out some changes to suit his/her preferences. Culture is not just handed down like money, house or tools to be inherited, but learned. In other words, it is inherited by learning, and not merely by being handed down. Every individual forms part of the social group which has its own distinctive mark of culture. Proverbs, among other things, provide for the existence and common interests and active loyalty within the group, fulfill the biological needs of the members of the group and establish the orderly way of life which is accepted by the group. Francis (2013: 254) points

out that even if the major function of these stylistic features is communication, they are used in normal social life.

The Use of Proverbs as Language Devices

Proverbs are used to teach the young about morals and values of their particular communities. Their content deals with different challenges that life presents. People use proverbs to mark their identity as they go through life. Phaahla (2012: 128) goes on to say:

Depending on the context, we almost unthinkingly speak and act in ways appropriate to the situation, because we have learnt how to do this from a young age, in the family, in kindergarten, and in our formal education. All human identities are social in nature because identity is about meaning, and meaning is not an essential property of words and things: meaning develops in context dependent use.

Through their use, people behave in certain ways to remain consistent with their in-group's norms as well as the social roles, attitudes and beliefs. In the Northern Sotho society, like in any society, the individual is provided with culture through language. Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1991: 186) states that language is the carrier of culture, and thus, language as culture is the collective memory bank of the people's experience in history. Proverbs form part of language and through them, one gets the entire cultural heritage which determines one's feelings. This includes the total expression of beliefs, tradition, art and customs. The way in which the Northern Sotho-speaking people use their proverbial expressions indicate the level of their culture.

Speeches that include proverbs are considered to be rich, precise and rationally organized. People voice their concerns in a unique way in all spheres of life. The manner in which they construct their opinions assert their identity through language. It is a language, more than anything else, that reveals and validates people's existence. People should, therefore, reflect their culture and identity. Nxasana (2009: 18) indicates that people's voices relate their expressions in a language which is reflective of the socio-cultural reality of their life. This shows that proverbs are cultural conventions that provided people with knowledge of how to live successfully long before the introduction of the formal education. These language devices always

avoid obscurity/ambiguity in terms of expressing their moral lessons in a metaphorical and fixed form and are within the bounds of the discourse parameters of the given culture.

Proverbial Expressions

The proverbial expressions serve as an effective vehicle to reflect the culture of a particular group. Context is one of the most important characteristics that help us to understand the lexical items in sentences and passages. These proverbial expressions are also regarded as the experiences of a particular society. Mathumba (2000:265) further defines a proverb as “a concise, stylized metaphorical sentence, usually displaying peculiar formal features, expressing common truths, familiar to and accepted by all members of a particular language community”.

The Northern Sotho society, like other African societies, is not individualistic but communalistic in nature. The interests and ideas of the community are cherished over that of the individual. Lever (2011:23) also maintains that individuals do not actually choose the form of their social life and that people are regulated according to the demands or expectations of the community. This implies that no one can do things on his/her own free will or voluntarily. A person who does things on his/her will struggle to make sure that he/she fits into the dictates of his/her own cultural environment. Human beings are individuals, yet also part of a society. Even if they have their own individual needs to satisfy, they should at the same time have to embrace the needs of the society.

Proverbs such as *lebala la kgomo le bonala namaneng* (Like father like son) and *Khudu ga e lahle legapi la yona* (Literally: The tortoise does not throw away its shell — meaning that a person does not change his/her behaviour) serve as a basis of comprehensive knowledge in the community. They constitute the people’s perception of the deepest truth about nature. They are deeply rooted into the cultural beliefs of the people because they interpret the striking events in order to particularize a special perception of man. They have more of historic truths than supernatural. The aspects of perception could be from the features of the environment and the behaviour of individuals.

The mutual acceptance of each other is a constituent of the welfare of the community. The following proverbs;

Babedi ga ba lwe, ba ronana dinta (Mokgokong and Ziervogel 1975: 67),

(Unity is strength), and

Dimpša tše pedi ga di šitwe ke sebata (Mokgokong and Ziervogel 1975: 1078),

(Many hands make light work),

indicate indispensable need for togetherness. The Northern Sotho people are very cooperative in matters pertaining to their community. All the projects like, for example, building schools and crèches, and different matters to solve frictions between members of the community are discussed in public meetings for the development of their community. Every member of the community is expected to make an input on how things should be done.

Nearly everybody who addresses the public talks about the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) which, in fact, was already in existence and was being practiced long before the dawn of the new South Africa. The proverbs mentioned above contain wisdom and establish ideas for communal strategic planning. The Reconstruction and Development Programme, through these proverbs, represent the hopes of many Northern Sotho-speaking and traditional-minded people who build the economy that benefits all members of the community. Every person’s level of activity largely depends on the attitude of the community. The individual’s behaviour and experiences have made the Northern Sotho-speaking people to do the community services collectively.

Another proverb which says;

Lehlaku le sefsa le ema ka le letala

(Mokgokong and Ziervogel 1975: 404),

(Youth gains through the experience of the aged),

indicate that youth depends on adults for survival. Here, alliteration plays an important role in the revelation of folklore. The initial consonant is repeated just to convey the message home.

It is the Northern Sotho tradition for adults to control the human behaviour of the young people by imposing the human expression upon them. Even if individuals prove to be descendants derived from different ancestors, it is evident that some kind of common process is engaged in becoming human. It stresses the fact that people have much more in common. Adults enforce their children to be like them. Their belief is that a proverb exhibits fruitful cultural set-

ting of the Northern Sotho-speaking people. There is a close connection between the primitive and the modern generations. This proverb helps to analyze the facts of life in a more sophisticated manner. In this way, responsibility becomes the primary interest of the elders for the welfare of the young generation. The significance of this proverb is, therefore, based on unity and support.

Its detailed cultural description offers insight into the real community language usage. Metaphor is also susceptible to every local language practices. It is more consciously analogical. In terms of its form, it deserves its highest degree of strength from contrast, that is, it depends mostly on the unlikeness of the objects compared. It is really 'alive' on the basis that it implies a comparison between two different things. The object in this case is called something else. Tulloch (1993: 958) describes metaphor as:

The application of a name or descriptive term or phrase to an object or action to which it is imaginatively, but not literally applicable.

An example of metaphor as defined above is:

Bošego ke tau bo re go sa ra hlolana (Nokaneng 1975: 179).

(A good neighbour asks after one's health each morning).

The mutual understanding here is performed inversely. The proverb appeals to the Northern Sotho people to spare life and to continue with eternal unity. It stops people from displaying life pollution in their area and encourages them to get a fair share of a better life. For their sacrifice of life by looking after one another, they become people to rely on. Reconciliation becomes the order of the day. People are empowered to enjoy living in safe and serviced neighbourhoods. Every group of people has a coherent cultural plan that addresses its existence. According to Gallagher (1964: 232), all the communities, including the Northern Sotho one, have their patterns of social cleavage taken into some organized unity and solidarity.

People are supposed to treat their neighbours well. Everybody has a sense of belonging. With the application of this proverb, the Northern Sotho people can live amicably on their land and without harbouring any feelings of hatred. Through their mutual love and understanding, they become each other's confidant and source of comfort. It is an acceptable tendency for the

Northern Sotho-speaking people to yearn for recognition and to express curiosity about the welfare of their fellow human beings. Emotions and feelings are in other people than in themselves. This is a way of developing the society. There is no essence of individuality, but that of communality. About this type of love, Versfeld (1980: 80) says:

Love is what holds the universe together as a sequence of mutual attraction of mutually relevant events.

A simile is another type of a figure of speech which deals with direct comparison. Here, the object is like something else. One object is compared to another of a different kind. When the words are used literally, an object is like another object of a different nature. Abrams (2011: 64) views it as follows:

In a simile, a comparison between two distinctly different things is indicated by the word "like" or "as".

The proverb:

Kgoši e sego ya geno e kaka mohlanka (van Zyl 1963: 35)

(One is important amongst one's own people only)

reveals a comparison. To accommodate the word "like" in the proverb, its literal translation should be "the king who is not yours is like a servant".

The proverb earnestly stresses its concern for human rights. What is important about it is to protect the Northern Sotho speaking-people to exercise their own community rights in either individual or communal functions. Land and its people are not expected to be ravaged and envisaged by intruders. Power should not be misused. Community values and cultural norms should be preserved. By striving to maintain and protect their culture, they turn to understand themselves.

This proverb has an overwhelming mandate to protect their interests. It does not legitimize the exploitation and oppression of the Northern Sotho people by foreigners or any other external power structures. Such intruders who fail to realize that culture should be preserved are made to live in isolation so as to prevent them from threatening the traditional arrangement and the survival of the group. What emerge from this type of a comparison are fairness, impartiality and parity. Every person is supposed to assume some form of human status in a foreign land. According to Allen (1981: 233), any person from somewhere else can hold different views from

the communities he/she visits but it would be fair for him/her to adhere to the general rules of that society. Equality of all the human beings forms a solid social organization. The adherence to culture has a strong cultural bearing on developing societies.

In line with other types of figures of speech is personification. It gives human qualities to either inanimate objects, non-human things or to abstract things, that is, something which has the attributes of a human being while it is not human. The following proverb;

Mogatša' moeng ke mpa (Mabetlela 1981: 11),
(Visitors must be well-treated),

indicates a very strong link between *moeng* (a visitor) and *mpa* (the stomach) through the word *mogatša* (either wife's husband or man's wife).

The proverb shows how the Northern Sotho-speaking people treat their visitors. A well-known visitor and a stranger are treated alike. It is the Northern Sotho culture to protect and supply visitors with food as a means of sparing life. People must be well-treated as the Northern Sotho people do to others. It is a humanitarian principle to prepare food for visitors. This type of a tradition has rules of interpretation. It is a natural transformation found in culture. Provision of food strengthens human ties and physical factors. Firth (2008: 42) comments by stating that:

In every human society food is important from two points of view, the nutritional, satisfying the energy requirements and biological needs of the human body; and the sociological, as a means of expressing and maintaining social relations.

Thus, food has nutritional and sociological values. The Northern Sotho people use these values not because of sufficient natural resources, but out of love for people. Even though visitors may sometimes reject the offer for food, some kind of generosity has been indicated.

Hyperbole cannot be left out in this discussion. The proverb in the form of hyperbole in this case is described more than it is expected. It is a statement that goes above reality. Cuddon (2012: 435) describes it as:

A figure of speech which contains an exaggeration for emphasis.

The following example of a proverb in the form of a hyperbole:

Mahlo a bošego ke lebone (Rakoma 1978:170)

(Literally: The eyes of the evening are the lamp — meaning that parents are guides to their children)

reveals the excessiveness of truth. Even if the proverb overemphasizes the facts of life, it is educative. Its overestimation is instructive. The future of a child lies in the hands of the parents. Parents are expected to teach their children to be wise. Wisdom is not inherited, but taught. Parents have better knowledge and skills of maintaining life and are the ones who should play an important role in the leading of the young.

According to Massat (1995: 323), mothers are supposed to share child-care responsibilities with fathers. According to this proverb, parents should sometimes tell their children about their own past experiences. In the Northern Sotho culture, someone's parents do not mean the biological ones, but any elderly person, that is, in the absence of one parent, a guardian or any other parent in the community may take the lead. This general responsibility generates the positive outcomes for the developing societies they assist.

There are other proverbs which reveal assonance for common strategies. What is important is the cultural meaning of the words in a proverb, but not the sound of the vowels. The sounds are only necessary for the emphasis of facts. An example of such repetition is found in the proverb that says:

Bana ba tadi ba tsebana ka mereto (Serudu 1989: 40).

(Birds of a feather flock together).

All the Northern Sotho-speaking people are closely joined by a series of social relationships. Their uniqueness and spontaneity of social life help to trace their origin and history. Their type of life reveals culture which is used to assess their language, behaviour and knowledge of history. Their common features are the supreme creation of their society. Identification plays an important role as Abbot (1995: 164) puts it in this way:

A community implies a coherent entity with a clear identity and a commonality of purpose.

Pun is also an amusing use of an expression which has two different meanings which sound the same. Watson (1976: 904) views it as:

A witticism involving the playful use of a word in different senses or of two words which differ in meaning but sound alike.

The evidence of the definition is found in the proverb that says:

Ga go mopipi wo o sa nego, mepipi ka moka e a na (Lentsoane 1992: 33).

(No house without a mouse).

Words are more or less the same for amusement. They follow each other unconstrained. Lentsoane directs the proverb to Dikgoneng who has a very serious problem with her son Kgoteledi. They do not reach consensus about his marriage. Dikgoneng wants her son, Kgoteledi, to marry Mokgadi who is born and bred in a rural area. Her problem is that her son does not want to marry the lady she likes. Kgoteledi also has a problem for the reason that his mother wants to prevent him from marrying the Tsonga lady, Mehloti, whom he marries at last.

Sometimes people may think that life is unfair. They think that they are the only people who encounter problems of life. Every family has its own problems which people must be ready to face. Problems do not segregate. Life is full of up-side-downs. Basically, according to Howard and Dunaif-Hattis (2014: 603), people must face difficulties with an attempt to improve their standard of living. Problems are of great significance in the decision-making process. This is a sensitive issue to the society's vitality, creativity and openness to the people at large. Problems of life are always present to develop knowledge test which is valid under a variety of similar or different circumstances.

CONCLUSION

Proverbs do not only play a role in the formation of language, but also reveal culture of the African people. What pleases is that these stylistic features are well-known and applicable in layman's language. These features guide the Northern Sotho people under a single traditional system. In general, they are considered as social human benefits which specialize in human relations. Their social impact enhances human creativity. They address both innovation and tradition. Their symbolic language is utilized to reveal today's reality. An individual is not allowed to get the space and freedom to entertain his/her individual needs on the basis that anything that is seen as threatening the societal demands, interests or expectations is viewed as abnormal. In the Northern Sotho culture, communalism takes precedence over indi-

vidualism. This implies that whatever happens among the Northern Sotho speaking-people has to be in the interest of and according to the dictates of the community.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Parents should continue to transmit proverbs, as part of oral art, from one generation to the next because their use is gradually fading out. Changing times and situations require forms of expressions that the traditional proverbs can no longer supply. This implies that new proverbs should be created to express and come to terms with contemporary issues and new technology. People should be proud of their culture because all informants affirmed that there are people belonging to the language group and who consider themselves members of that tribe without mastering the language. More books should be written in their own indigenous language because oral literature, which comprises culture bound elements like proverbs, riddles, puns, recitations, songs, stories and many more, is a type of literature derived by word of mouth that has turned out to be a very useful concept for those scholars interested in examining the cultural relationships between those who can read and write. Government should play a role in the development of the Northern Sotho language, together with other indigenous languages that were previously marginalized. Television and radio, which are important Western technological instruments, should play a very important role in the development of oral tradition.

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