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### Probing the Relevance of Some Northern Sotho Proverbs in the 21st Century through Rakoma'sMarema-Ka-Dikatša Sesotho saLebowa: a Socio-cultural Evolution Model

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#### ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to probe the relevance of some Northern Sotho proverbs in the 21<sup>st</sup> century through Rakoma's *Marema-Ka-Dikatša Sesotho saLebowa* by endeavouring to outline and present Northern Sotho proverbs for interrogation, analysis and interpretation in order to establish their efficacy in contemporary society. Proverbs form an integral part of the Northern Sotho language in that the language is not aesthetically complete without them. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Northern Sotho proverbs were only oral (not written) in that they were transmitted from one generation to another by word of mouth. Rakoma collected all available, valuable wealth of frequently used Northern Sotho proverbs and compiled a book called *Marema – ka- dika: Tša Sesotho saLebowa* in order to preserve them for posterity. This study contends that some of these proverbs must be scrapped because they do not edify contemporary society. Socio-cultural Evolution Model which seeks to “understand the relationship between technologies, social structure, the values of a society, and how and why they change with time” (Lenski, 2005:1), underpins this qualitative study. Rakoma's *Marema – ka- dika: Tša Sesotho saLebowa* was purposively sampled because of its relevance to the study, and then probed through the textual analysis technique. This study recommends that irrelevant proverbs be scrapped from use in all platforms in favour of progressive ones for the benefit and development of humanity.

## Introduction

Northern Sotho, is an African language in the South Eastern zone of South Africa, spoken by the Northern Sotho people in and around Polokwane. Noteworthy is that it is a language which is dominated the use of folkloric proverbial expressions which are handed down to posterity. Motebele (1997:1) acknowledges that “proverbs and riddles constitute part of oral traditional literature. They are a legacy from the past, handed down from generation to generation by word of mouth...they are used to advice and guide”. By virtue of their nuanced semantic inclination, proverbs are not easy to interpret, especially by novice speakers or non-natives of the language. Just like all other African language, Northern Sotho has cultural traits and practices, norms and standards embedded and rooted in it. For one to know and understand the culture of a particular community, they should first acquaint themselves with the language spoken in that community because language is a carrier of culture. Aziza (2001: 31) corroborates that:

Culture...refers to the totality of the pattern of behaviour of a particular group of people. It includes everything that makes them distinct from any other group of people for instance, their greeting habits, dressing, social norms and taboos, food, songs and dance patterns, rites of passages from birth, through marriage to death, traditional occupations, religious as well as philosophical beliefs. For example, the Northern Sotho proverbial expression that goes *o iketsebadimong* (he has gone to the gods) is not literal but figurative, and can only be fathomed by a person who understands Northern Sotho speakers and their culture. The proverbial expression means that the person has died. There are, nevertheless, some proverbs whose use is irrelevant today because they promote, among other things, gender stereotypes in the community. This study, therefore, aims of to probe the relevance of some Northern Sotho proverbs in the 21<sup>st</sup> century through Rakoma's *Marema-Ka-Dikatša Sesotho saLebowa* by endeavouring to outline and present Northern Sotho proverbs for interrogation, analysis and interpretation in order to establish their efficacy in contemporary society.

## Socio-cultural Evolution Model

Culture is a dynamic phenomenon which evolves with the trends of changing times. African culture is not different. Her folkloric proverbs should, in order to maintain their relevance, therefore, move to suit contemporary life and situations. For this reason, some of the proverbs such as *monnakelepai re a gogelana* (a man is a blanket we share him), which are not community-building must be done away with. This proverb gives men *carte blanche* to sleep around with as many women as they like.

The semantic relevance and importance of proverbs change gradually due to culture and language dynamism. The term evolution is widely used to refer to the development through time of societies and cultures. This study is, therefore, buttressed by the Lenski's (2005) Socio-cultural Evolution Model (SEM). He (2005:1) defines it (SEM) as:

the process by which structural reorganization is affected through time, eventually producing a form or structure which is qualitatively different from the ancestral form.... Evolutionism then becomes the scientific activity of finding nomothetic explanations for the occurrence of such structural changes". Although such theories typically provide models for understanding the relationship between technologies, social structure, the values of a society, and how and why they change with time, they vary as to the extent to which they describe specific mechanisms of variation and social change.

Lenski (2005:1) further states that "societies exist in complex social environments (i.e. with natural resources and constraints), and adapt themselves to these environments". It is thus inevitable that all societies change. Sociocultural evolution also encompasses socio-cultural transformations accompanied by decreases of complexity (degeneration) as well as ones not accompanied by any significant changes of sociocultural complexity.

Lenski's SEM is most appropriate to assist this study to justify the inevitability of cultural evolution and the need to dispose of inapplicable proverbs in Northern Sotho so that it (Northern Sotho) is compatible with the changing folkloric world.

### **Methodology**

The aim of this study is to probe the relevance of some Northern Sotho proverbs in the 21<sup>st</sup> century through Rakoma's *Marema-Ka-Dikatša Sesotho saLebowa* by outlining and presenting Northern Sotho proverbs for interrogation, analysis and interpretation in order to establish their efficacy in contemporary society. For this reason, qualitative research approach is the most appropriate approach in this probing. Qualitative research was particularly effective in obtaining culturally specific information about values, opinions, behaviours and social contexts of particular populations. Haradhan (2018:2) defines qualitative research as a form of social action that stresses on the way of people interpret, and make sense of their experiences to understand the social reality of individuals. It makes use of interviews, diaries, journals and classroom observations. Qualitative research approach will give guidance and direction to this study to obtain irrelevant proverbs from Rakoma's *Marema-Ka-Dikatša Sesotho saLebowa* and to enable this study to analyse culturally specific data about values and behaviours of Northern Sotho in the form of proverbs to be analysed. Burns and Grove (2001:223) define research design as clearly defined structures of research. Exploratory research design employed in this study.

### **Sampling**

This study has adopted purposive sampling method. A purposive sampling, which is also referred to as judgemental or expert sampling, is a type of nonprobability sampling. The main objective of a purposive sampling is to produce a sample that can be logically assumed to be representative of the

population. This is often accompanied by applying expert knowledge of the population to select in a non-random manner a sample of elements that represents a cross-section of the population (Lavrakas, 2008:1). Purposive sampling has made provision for this study to collect all inapplicable proverbs from one source, which is *Marema-Ka-Dikatša Sesotho saLebowa*, and analyse them textually.

### **Data Collection**

Due to the textual nature of this study, data was collected from the text, *Marema-Ka-Dikatša Sesotho saLebowa*. All irrelevant proverbs were purposively collected from the text and analysed. Each data source (each proverb in this case) has its strengths and limitations, which was explicitly described to ensure that sources are used and interpreted appropriately (Peersman, 2014:10). Therefore, the study did not rely on the population for data collection, thus even the methods of data collection such as interviews and focus groups were not applicable.

### **Data Analysis**

Peersman (2014:10) purports that data analysis is an important section of research writing, and the final stage of data processing. Qualitative data analysis implies pursuing the relationship between categories and themes of data seeking to increase the understanding of the phenomenon. This study analysed data in the form of irrelevant proverbs carefully selected from the text. During the analysis, irrelevant proverbs will be identified, written in their original Northern Sotho form, translated into English, its literal and figurative connotations analysed, and lastly, verdict given to declare the proverb irrelevant in the contemporary society.

### **Findings**

The use of irrelevant proverbs in Northern Sotho pose some challenges in society today. When culture evolves, they persistently resist it, running the risk of being obsolete. It is usually older members of the society who resist change for fear of moving out of their comfortable, long familiar cultural patterns (O'Neil, 2006). Change is a compelling force that is impossible to resist, and societies that embrace it normally experience progress while those opposing it stagnate behind only to suffer consequences.

### **Proverbs which May Incite Violence in the Community**

Rakoma (1975) did not invent Northern Sotho proverbs, but compiled all available and frequently used proverbs from Northern Sotho speaking communities. Rakoma (1975:153) presents the proverb: *fihlathupa o senyengwana*:

PROVERB	DIRECT TRANSLATION	LITERAL MEANING	FIGURATIVE MEANING
Fihlathupa o senyengwana.	Spare the rod and spoil the child.	The child must be punished (corporally) for mischiefs lest he/she will be spoiled.	The child must be punished (corporally) for mischiefs lest he will be spoiled.

The above proverb is highly capable of inciting domestic violence in communities in that if parents at home and teachers in schools can adopt the culture of **sparing the rod and spoiling the child**, they will administer corporal punishment onto their children. Corporal punishment is outlawed in schools and at home, and its use is treated as violent abuse of children.

Amongst many scholars who wrote about the irrelevance of some Northern Sotho proverbs today is Possa (2010:12) who conducted a fieldwork research to make a collection of new proverbs, and observed them in use in a practical situation. She established that as language changes, proverbs too change, both in meaning and structure, because they form an integral part of the language. She further concedes that proverbs have gone and should go through transformation for language(s) to develop. It is through this change that some proverbs maintain the convenient *status quo* while others are progressive and geared towards nation-building. Possa (2010) recommended that inevitable language evolution in terms of structure and meaning of proverbs should be for the benefit of members of community that use that language.

The following are other proverbs capable to incite violence in communities:

PROVERB	DIRECT TRANSLATION	LITERAL MEANING	FIGURATIVE MEANING
Lefotwana e sego la gago o hloba le gaela	If the hatchling is not yours, you plug out its feathers without mercy	If the child is not yours, most of the time, you do not care about his/her wellbeing.	If the child is not yours, most of the times you, do not care about his/her wellbeing.
The above proverb promotes love for one's biological children and neglect and ill-treatment of those who are not biologically yours. This will lead to social disorder and anarchy where the community hate one another.			
Kgomoga e latswenamaney a e šele.	A cow does not lick a foreign calf	A person cannot love another person's child.	A person cannot love another person's child.
This proverb is similar to the previous one. Love your own children and hate those who are yours. This will construct a society based on hatred.			

### Proverbs Promoting Gender Disparity

Northern Sotho language like most African languages contains plenty of proverbs capable of promoting patriarchal gender disparity. Gender-based unfair treatment implies unpleasant treatment with a primary motive of

embarrassing and inflicting pain on individuals. Rakoma (1975:146) dispensed yet another interesting irrelevant proverb as follows:

PROVERB	DIRECT TRANSLATION	LITERAL MEANING	FIGURATIVE MEANING
Lebitla la mosadikeboga di	The grave of a woman is where she is married	A woman must stay with her in-laws irrespective of difficult circumstances	A woman must stay with her in-laws until she dies.
The above proverb oppresses women to continue to stay with their in-laws even if circumstances do not allow. Women must always be at liberty to leave or pull out of abusive relationships. Men should not abuse women and use this proverb to justify their wrong behaviour.			

One of the wrong things about African traditional societies was wife-beating. This is supported by the loose saying that to show that you really love your wife, you must beat her up. Besides the normal beating of a wife, there existed an indirect one inflicted upon a recalcitrant and difficult wife. This was marrying a second wife as one proverb tells us: beat a bad wife with a new one (Wanjohi, 2005:7).

Majority of African proverbs which are full of patriarchal prejudice and oppression are those which begin with *monna* (man) and *mosadi* (woman). For example, *mosadikepudi, monnakenku*(A woman is a goat, and a man is a sheep). This means that the character of a woman is associated with a goat. A goat is generally known for shouting, quick reactions, mischief and disorderliness. On the contrary, man resembles a sheep with gentle character, patience, respect and orderliness. This proverb contains an element of prejudice against women because it claims that whenever they are faced with a problem, women shout and spoil chances of arriving at a solution in a sensible and rational manner. Although men are associated with a decent animal, sarcastically, the deep figurative meaning of this proverb might subtly imply that they are as stupid as a sheep. A sheep is an animal which is not creative. It cannot even attempt to escape or scream for help when in trouble. Conversely, the proverb might be implying that men normally endure pain and suffering without making any attempt to seek assistance. This interpretation is supported by another proverb, *monnakenku o llelateng* (a man does not openly complain, he just endures pain). This trains men to endure and resist difficult situations. It encourages men not to share their problems with other people, even if they are physically or emotionally abused by their partners. Idanq(2015:10) asseverates:

Men are oppressed and prejudiced by proverbs which originated from fragments of culture. African culture is embedded in strong moral considerations. It has a system of various beliefs and customs which every individual ought to keep in order to live long and to avoid bringing curses on them and others. Most of these proverbs are used to guide and channel decision-making of most African people, and are cultured.

According to the African tradition, Northern Sotho culture in particular, a woman is obliged to persevere all forms of abuse and domestic violence without complaining. As if it is not enough, she is expected to die at her abusive husband's home. Mashige (2011:103) concedes that: "Sesotho male-oriented proverbs, males are associated with positive attributes such as strength, endurance, bravery, super ordinary, secretiveness and wisdom". This implies that women are the opposite. Mashige (2011) focused mainly on male-oriented proverbs in Sesotho; proverbs that praise men and label them as heroes while women are reduced to subordinates.

### **Obscene Proverbial Expressions**

Most Northern Sotho proverbs are full of socially unacceptable language, which denotes disrespect. Northern Sotho speakers use these ribald proverbs under the protection of the saying which goes *sepediga se rogame* (Northern Sotho does not use derogatory words). This saying indirectly granted Northern Sotho people unwarranted freedom to use language freely without euphemistic limits and boundaries. Burrige (2012:6) declares:

Euphemisms are characterized by avoidance language and evasive expression. We create them when we are faced the tricky problem of how to talk in different contexts about things that for one reason or another we would prefer not to speak of unrestrainedly in the prevailing context. In this primary function, euphemisms are verbal escape hatches created in response to taboos. These include the usual suspects — private parts, bodily functions, sex, anger, dishonesty, drunkenness, madness, disease, death, dangerous animals, fear, God and so on.

Euphemism is mostly used in Northern Sotho and other African languages to signify respect. It is considered immoral to say, *moagišane waka o hwile* (my neighbour has died), rather say *moagišane waka o hloka getše* (my neighbour has passed on). Expressions such as *...e hwile* are relevant when referring to the death of an animal and not of a human being. A woman gave birth to a child, (*mosadi o belegengwana*). This one is in order and respectful, as opposed to the radical *mosadi o tswetšengwana*, *...o tswetše* is an expression which is limited to animals.

Northern Sotho is a language which is saturated with proverbs which transgress the rules of euphemism:

PROVERB	DIRECT TRANSLATION	FIGURATIVE TRANSLATION
Mahlale a ngwana a kamaragong, ge a khunama a atšhologa	The child's tricks are between the buttocks, when he/she squats, the tricks flow out.	The child's tricks are short-lived, if one asks them questions one quickly arrives at his/her real mischievous intentions.

The above proverb is morally inconsiderate and inappropriate to be uttered in the midst of children, although its figurative meaning is relevant and appropriate.

The following are other proverbs which bear unpleasant language:

PROVERB	DIRECT TRANSLATION	FIGURATIVE TRANSLATION
Lešepa la mpša le nkgelasemetseng, la oma le a hlaba.	Faeces of a dog must be disposed of while still bad smelling, if it dries-up, it pricks.	If one has a problem, they should solve it immediately, if they delay, the problem will compound.
Itialesilomarago, wa le itiamahlo le tlo go lemoga.	Hit the stupid on the buttocks, you hit his/her face, he/she will wake up.	If you gain from a person, keep a low profile and go on to encourage him/her to provide you with edifying things.
Lešepakgolo la moeng le feta la mong-gae.	Big faeces of a visitor is greater/bigger than the host person's.	A visitor is mostly handled with respect than a local person.

### Proverbs that Influence Wrong Decisions

Cultural expressions such as proverbs have, for generations, been used by Africans to guide and justify decision-making. When faced with a crucial decision-making situation, an African, will quote a proverb to help him/her navigate the issue. Some proverbs condone deception and mischief. Aboluwodu (2014:33) affirms:

It is a common practice among Africans to engage proverbs when significant issues relating to the life of communal members are discussed. Proverbs are sometimes used to caution parents on how they bring up their children, serve as a cultural resource to resolve crisis, at times among couples and strengthening the bond among members of the various African communities.

The proverb, *botse re llabeloswana, bošwanyanabo a lahla* (a lady who is dark in complexion is more beautiful than a light complexioned one). The deep meaning of this proverb signifies that when looking for a wife, a man should better go for a dark and ugly woman rather than a beautiful light complexioned one. A beautiful light complexioned woman is usually admired by all men, and as such she may end up leaving you for the them. Another proverb which



shares a similar logic with this one *ismosadi o botsebokgarebe a nyalwalesilo* (a woman is beautiful when still a girl, and stupid when married). If this proverb is used as a point of reference and to inform decisions, it could instill fear in young men who have come of age to marry.

### Discussion

The study has established that proverbs play a significant role in the lives of Africans. African people, not only revere proverbs as part of their cultural heritage, but they consult them for guidance and decision-making every time they face social challenges. In the African proverbial culture, it is a taboo to reconcile with the woman you once married, and the guiding proverb to forbid a man to undertake such action is *isyaboelapitseng e a swa*, transliterated as (if it goes back into the pot, it gets burnt). There is a figurative interpretation of this proverb is that men should not reconcile with their former partners because it is deadly. This study has further led us to believe that many African communities still rely on proverbs to justify their unbecoming behaviour. In many African cultures, proverbs are even considered practically sacred (Wanjohi, 2008:8). In other words, no matter how irrelevant they are in contemporary society today, such African cultural communities will not desecrate their heritage by phasing them out in favour of modern civilisation.

### Recommendations

The following recommendations flow from the findings and discussion of the entire study:

- Irrelevant proverbs must be scrapped from use in all formal literature and formal gatherings because they might propagate deception in the community.
- Only progressive proverbs must continue to be functional. The following proverb is an example of a progressive proverb: *Lege o ka e buelaleopeng, magokobu a go bona* (even if you can skin it in the valley, the vultures see you). The figurative meaning is that all evil one commits under a veil of secrecy, will one day be exposed.
- No matter how sacred proverbial cultural heritage is, outdated and irrelevant proverbs should not be used to justify wrong decision-making.

### Conclusion

The aim of this study was to probe the relevance of some Northern Sotho proverbs in the 21<sup>st</sup> century through Rakoma's *Marema-Ka-Dikatša Sesotho saLebowa* by endeavouring to outline and present Northern Sotho proverbs for interrogation, analysis and interpretation in order to establish their efficacy in contemporary society. The study established that there are, indeed, some Northern Sotho proverbs such as *mosadiketšhwene o lewamabogo* (loosely translated; a woman is a baboon we eat her hands which stereotypically means that a woman must work like a slave), which are irrelevant for use today because it promotes gender prejudice. Northern Sotho has been used as a

microcosm of many indigenous languages in Africa where such biased proverbs are still in use. Wanjohi (2005:7) quotes some proverbs from different African countries which are permeated with gender nuances, "A very beautiful woman is either a witch or a prostitute" and "A mother of only daughters does not laugh in front of others". This study recommends that irrelevant proverbs be scrapped from use in all platforms in favour of progressive ones for the benefit and development of humanity.

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