

Sepedi Proverbs that are Oppressive against Men

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Abstract

This article examines some Sepedi proverbs that are oppressive against men. This is due to the discovery that there are quite a few of such proverbs in the Sepedi language. The proverbs to be considered are *Monna ke nku o llela teng* (A man is a sheep, he cries internally) and *Modiidi ga a tsogelwe* (A poor man does not get erection). These proverbs are selected as the idea of male oppression comes out very vividly in them. Each proverb will be discussed, also considering the figures of speech associated with it. The subtopics of this discourse are introduction, analysis, and conclusion.

Keywords: *Sepedi, proverbs, oppression, men*

Introduction

While some Sepedi proverbs are oppressive to men, hitherto, very little research has been conducted focusing on the subject. Ranape (2003), on whose doctoral study this article is based on, is the only scholar who has done so. Although proverbs are wise words which are used to teach, advise, encourage cooperation, console, encourage acceptable behaviour, and disapprove of unacceptable behaviour (Saayman, 1997: 52-53), there are equally those proverbs that are unconsciously and unintentionally oppressive to certain groups or individuals in society.

Oppression is a phenomenon or practice that is observed amongst human beings. It happens to groups and individual members of society, irrespective of gender, race, colour, or age. This paper deals with proverbs whose common use and interpretation perpetuate acts of oppression against men. Only two proverbs are sampled for analysis in this discourse, and they are *Monna ke nku o llela teng* (A man is a sheep, he cries internally) and *Modiidi ga a tsogelwe* (A poor man does not get erection). These two proverbs are popular and some of the most used among Sepedi speakers.

Analysis

a) *Monna ke nku o llela teng* (A man is a sheep, he cries internally)

The analysis of this proverb will be undertaken by dissecting the discussion into four sub-topics. First, what is *monna* (a man) in the African context. This sub-topic will explore the way in which African societies expect a man to conduct himself and the basic qualities that, according to culture, qualify him to be a complete man. The second sub-topic analyses the reasons Africans, particularly Bapedi, characteristically associate a man with a sheep. It illuminates the attributes that are ascribed to a sheep and are expected of a man. The observed behaviour of a sheep is equated to a man's conduct. Thirdly, the interpretation of this proverb is analysed to indicate the way it propagates oppression against men. The expectation of society of a man is explored. The significance of the comparison between a man and a sheep is analysed to get the similarities between the two items. Fourthly, the role of figures of speech as displayed by the utilisation of the identifying copula '*ke*' (is) in this proverb, and its importance in the interpretation of this proverb, are examined.

i) A man

What is *monna* (a man)? *Monna* (a man), in the context of Bapedi, refers to a male person and not every human being. It is expected of a man to have certain distinctive qualities. A man must be brave and able to protect his family against all forms of attack. He fights and does not retreat, even if he feels overpowered. He enters terrifying terrains which are not easily accessible. This perception about a man is more emphatic to males who graduate from the first and second grades of traditional initiation schools. A boy who is a graduate from an initiation school is referred to as a man, irrespective of his age. This emanates from the unfriendly and tormenting weather conditions through which the initiates go, and the physical pain to which they are subjected during the process of traditional initiation. Hence those males who, because of their soft hearts and not wanting to be exposed to the second round of the painful experience, do not attend the second grade of initiation, and eventually fail to attain manhood in its totality. They are therefore not considered men enough. They are referred to as *magaola*, meaning dropouts. This attitude is also true with other African national groups. For instance, among amaXhosa, a male who has not undergone traditional initiation is not considered a man but a boy, irrespective of his age (Mtumane, 2004: 133; 2007: 79).

ii) Associating a man with a sheep

Africans, the Bapedi nation in particular, have a culture of occasionally practising certain rituals which they believe is their way of communicating with their ancestors. A sheep is a quiet and calm domestic animal which the Bapedi slaughter for events or when they want to have meat. It cannot, however, be slaughtered for the purpose of communicating with ancestors because, even if it is under tremendous pain, it often does not express the pain through the production of any sound. It endures the hard pain until it dies, hence it is not slaughtered during weddings or ancestral rituals. Its exclusion from the performance of rituals is based on the idea that it does not communicate any message to the ancestors as it remains quiet. This practice is observed among amaXhosa as well. Hence a goat or cow is normally slaughtered for rituals involving the appeasing of ancestors,

because these animals (always) bleat or bellow when they are slaughtered. Not making the sound is considered as an indication that the ancestors have not received a message or are not appeased (Mtumane, 2014: 29). Therefore, this proverb intends to encourage men to show bravery by enduring emotional and physical pains caused by various life experiences. They must not cry literally when they encounter challenges and pains in life. The interpretation of this proverb is discussed below, analysing its impact on oppression and the role played by the figures of speech in the proverb.

iii) The proverb and oppression

The proverb under consideration oppresses men (males) in that the latter are prohibited to express their emotions through the shedding of tears or lamenting, even under unbearably excruciating pain and anguish. If they do so, they will no longer be regarded as the real representation of manhood and will often be insulted. This causes emotional pain to them because every man wants to appear strong and brave enough to withstand and stomach horrendous pains to the extreme. Life experiences, which men are subjected or exposed to, can be tragic and, if not spoken about, can cause trauma. Fawcett and Waugh (2008: 45) describe trauma as an overpowering experience of horror and being destitute. These scholars go further to enunciate that “traumatic events can involve threats to life or bodily integrity, or a close personal encounter with violence or death” (*Ibid.*). When a man encounters a violent and life-threatening situation, he must, according to this proverb, conduct himself in a brave manner and face the situation without fear. Experiencing overwhelming pains in silence causes terrible and suppressed fear in men, which traumatises them to the extent that they may feel deserted. This, indeed, amounts to emotional oppression exerted by the language of proverbs.

iv) Figures of speech in the proverb

The considered proverb, while a figure of speech, contains two other figures of speech, which are the idiom and metaphor, as discussed below.

Idiom

According to the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (2010: 744), an idiom is a group of words whose meaning is different from the literal meaning of individual words. It is a linguistic semantic element whose meaning is difficult to derive from the words that constitute it. It is not a complete sentence, but a phrase. Sepedi idioms are characterised by the *go-* (to) prefix which is followed by a verb.

The proverb under discussion contains an idiom which serves the purpose of facilitating a metaphorical comparison between the characteristics of a man (*monna*) and those of a sheep (*nku*). The idiom ‘*go llela teng*’ (to cry internally) is used to conceal men’s emotions just the way a sheep does. It simplifies the comprehension of the attributes which a man shares with a sheep, which is that he is susceptible to sufferings, discomfort, and pains and, whenever he is faced with such situations, he must endure the same way a sheep does when it is subjected to serious pain, especially during its slaughtering. This perception of events oppresses males and does not give them the freedom to vent out their emotions in tears, screaming or lamenting.

Metaphor

Metaphor is the artistic way of using language to refer to something other than what it literally means, to suggest resemblance or connection between the two things (Moon and Knowles, 2004: 3). It is an implicit comparison of two dissimilar things, based on similarities of one or more characteristics.

The first part of the proverb *Monna ke nku* (a man is a sheep) analogically equates a male person to a sheep. Wanjohi (1997: 62) elucidates that although a man (*monna*) is equated to a sheep (*nku*), the two are not completely equal. What it means, according to Wanjohi (*Op cit.*), is that the two possess common characteristics, such as being quiet and gentle, while they differ in that a sheep is a meek domestic animal while a man is a human being who is expected to show a strong character. The last part of this proverb, *o llela teng*, which means he cries internally, extracts one characteristic of not crying out by a sheep and embraces it to a man, which serves to motivate and encourage him to always be brave. In the process of embracing this characteristic, a man suffers internal and the emotional pain of not being able to relieve himself through crying or sharing his pain with other people.

b) *Modiidi ga a tsogelwe* (A poor man does not get erection)

The state of being poor (poverty) in this proverb, refers to a man who does not have adequate wealth to live a normal life that is expected of any member of society. This definition of being poor is inclined towards Vollmer's (2011: 70) one when he expatiates that: "It touches aspects of morality, ethics and human dignity as well, and crosses the boundaries of subjectivity and intersubjectivity, understood as a concept that bridges the intrapsychic and interpersonal schools of thought".

The state of being poor affects human dignity and instigates disrespect. It is only a man who gets erection. This proverb therefore means that a man who is poverty stricken must not get erection.

For this analysis, 'a man' will also refer to a boy whereas a woman may refer to a girl as well. The analysis of this proverb is undertaken in two sub-topics. Firstly, the notion of the man as the provider who is expected to give monetary or material hope to his girlfriend or wife and children, is examined. Secondly, the interpretation of this proverb and the experiential observation of human conduct, girls, and women is analysed to expose its oppressive nature to a man.

i) Man as the provider

A man is a provider for the family. The proverb under scrutiny cautions men who do not have means to provide for women not to propose because women need to be taken care of, not only physically and emotionally, but financially as well. Therefore, a man who has insufficient or nothing to provide for a woman he loves, must not propose to her. African culture has taught men that they must take care of women and provide for them. A man should be able to satisfy the needs of a woman, failing which he will be considered a pseudo man. The proverb purports that if a man successfully proposes to a woman, he must first express a financial muscle to her.

Regarding family, in African culture, a man's wife and children are regarded as his dependents. He is expected to pay *lobola* in the form of cattle or money, to consolidate marriage. It is a man who marries a wife. The two, man and woman do not get married to each other, as the entire burden of marriage is placed upon the man. He is expected to build a house, buy clothes for, and feed his wife and children. The incapability of a man to execute the above renders him a useless entity who does not get respect from members of society and his family. It encroaches into morality among males and impacts on their self-esteem.

ii) The oppressive nature of the proverb

The oppressive nature of this proverb becomes evident when girls consider the material belongings of a man prior to being emotionally attached with him. This instils fear in men who do not have material possessions to entice the interest of girls. This practice, which is more prevalent in contemporary days, makes girls vulnerable to abuse. They engage in materially motivated love relationships with wealthy men who sometimes ultimately dump them, thus hurting their emotions.

This proverb plays a role in escalating moral degeneration within societies, as men are not given respect as ordinary men, but as people who can provide certain services. It also creates uncertainties in men as their manhood is determined by their material possessions and ability to provide. Men are deprived of the respect which is due to them as human beings. The proverb propels some men to engage in illegal activities to solicit enticement for girls. Through it, men are deprived of being loved unconditionally, which is a recipe for moral decay.

The phrase *ga a tsogelwe* (does not get erection) implies that such men are not afforded an opportunity to have sex. They should then not get erection as they will not have an opportunity to relieve it anyway.

Conclusion

This article has discussed two proverbs that are oppressive to men. The proverbs are *Monna ke nku o llela teng* (A man is a sheep, he cries internally) and *Modiidi ga a tsogelwe* (A poor man does not get erection). The first proverb discourages men from showing their emotional state, even if they are under painful circumstances. This is because men are always expected to demonstrate bravery and strength. It also proves them as real men. Failure to do that will prove them weak and not man enough. This situation may lead to silent emotional harm and depression in men. Hence the general view that more men commit suicide than women.

The second proverb puts men under pressure, regarding love relationships. It demands that they have material possessions, to provide for women, for them to be engaged in love relationships. Women tend to fall for men who can fend for them. A relationship then relies on a man's material strength. Men who do not have material possessions easily engage in criminal activities to solicit the needed material possessions, to entice women. The latter also get easily abused by the well to do men.

The two proverbs are a demonstration of how harmful the use of some proverbs may be to society, men in particular. Society may then need to reconsider their use, to avoid the serious and negative consequences they lead to.

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