

**MEANING IN THE CONTEXT  
OF  
CULTURE**

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M.A., D.Litt. et Phil. U.E.D. (S.A.)



**INAUGURAL LECTURE DELIVERED ON ACCEPTING THE CHAIR OF  
NORTHERN SOTHO AT THE UNIVERSITY OF THE NORTH  
ON FRIDAY THE 16TH SEPTEMBER, 1977.**

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## MEANING IN THE CONTEXT OF CULTURE

BY Prof. P.C. Mokgokong

1.0 Mr Vice-Chancellor, members of the Council, Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen. I invite you to take an excursion with me this evening into a complex and yet fascinating field of sociolinguistics, viz. *Meaning in the Context of Culture*.

1.1 In an attempt to give the Afrikaans version of "Papago Lina, sebatakômo!" a court-interpreter is reported to have said: "Papelina sy bees", whereupon the judge amazedly asked what relevance a beast had in a rape case. Quite rightly it had none, nor is a beast implied in the above utterance. The utterance makes no sense apart from its cultural context into which it fits perfectly. Culturally *sebatakômo* (which is an abbreviation of *sebata dikômong*) refers to a monster or a very dangerous beast of prey which will require an army of men to subdue. A cry of "sebatakômo!" has come to mean a cry of distress, i.e. an S.O.S. Accordingly, when the complainant in the above case saw the assailant suspiciously approach her, she called for help in the most poignant of terms: "Lena's father, come to my rescue!".

1.2 The dependence of meaning on cultural context can also be observed in the use of the verb *-bolaya*: When a Northern Sotho speaker says: *ke bolailê* (I have killed, i.e. I have appropriated something, which may be money picked up or a windfall), he is in fact reflecting the traditional hunting pursuits of his people. According to Northern Sotho culture men usually go game hunting and at the end the proudest are those who come back with the biggest kill. The modern English equivalent of *ke bolailê* might be "I have struck oil" or "my ship has come home".

1.3 The above examples underline the fact that we cannot isolate language from the cultural environment, of which it is an inseparable part. Each language is a product of a particular culture, and it reflects the culture of the people and their view of the world. The lack of true equivalences between any two languages is merely the outward expression of inward differences between two peoples in premises, in basic categories, in the training of fundamental sensitivities, and in the general view of the world. As Trudgill (1974, p. 24) has rightly observed,

"... a speaker's native language sets up a series of categories which act as a kind of grid through which he perceives the world, and which constrain the way in which he categorizes and conceptualizes different phenomena. A language can affect a society by influencing or even controlling the world-view of its speakers."

1.4 It is gratifying to note that some anthropologists, notably Malinowski, Boas and Firth, realized that to know and understand the speech of the people under investigation is the fieldworker's master-key. They, therefore, in the words of Kluckhohn (1962, p. 44), "tended less than other students to

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isolate speech from the total life of the people". To them language was a part of cultural behaviour with many interesting connections to other aspects of action and thought.

2.0 In this paper I shall discuss meaning in a cultural context under the following sub-headings:

- (a) honorifics
- (b) kinship terminology
- (c) linguistic taboo
- (d) ordinary cultural words and expressions
- (e) the proverb

### Honorifics

2.1 By honorific we understand a grammatical form used to convey the idea that the speaker is being polite or respectful to the hearer. Honorifics are based on social stratification, and in some languages it is exceedingly important, if one is to speak to people without grave social consequences for having used the wrong form. Of course what passes for politeness or respect in one culture may appear to a member of another culture as slavishness or boorishness. Some languages demand that a speaker make reference to his rank, age, sex, or social position, relative to the addressee when speaking. In Northern Sotho, however, honorification involves the use of the plural form when one addresses an older person or one who surpasses one in status, i.e. the speaker either actually is lower in status than the addressee, or is speaking as if he were. This is not surprising because plurality is ingrained in the social system of the Northern Sotho people. That is to say that an individual is viewed in the light of his social background, i.e. he is one of a group of relatives, friends and tribesmen. To divorce him from this group is to degrade him.

2.2 An examination of the following sentences will illustrate that the meaning may be either singular or plural indicating respect:

*bōmma ba tlilê* (mother has come or mothers have come or mother and company have come)

*ke boditšê bomalome gore ba ka se hwêtsê borakgadi ka gaê* (I told uncle that he would not find my paternal aunt at home or I told my uncles that they would not find my paternal aunts at home or I told uncle and company that they would not find my paternal aunt and company at home).

2.3 Plurality is also used in the form of greeting although one person may be addressed, e.g.

*ke a le tamiša* (I greet you)

*tamêng* (greetings to you)

*le kae* (where are you, i.e. how are you?)

*re gōna or re sa phela - re ka ra lena* (we are there, i.e. we are well or we are still alive. We may ask you)

*le rena re sa phela/re sa ba êkiša* (we also are still alive or we still imitate them.)

2.4 The foregoing dialogue indicates that in his culture a Pedi is always conscious of the vicissitudes of life, particularly the incidence of witchcraft which is to him the main cause of death. That is why some Northern Sotho speakers will actually answer a greeting by: *re sa palêtsê balôji* (We have still baffled the witches).

2.5 Pedi women usually address their husbands and other men by their praise-names: Hlabirwa, Nape, Ngwato, Gôbêtsê, Dimo, Phaahlê, Ngwanamorêi, Tšhidi. They address one another also by their praise-names: Hunadi, Napšadi, Mologadi, Mosêbjadi, Mogaleadi, Pheladi, Mahlaku, Modipadi. Husbands address their wives and other women as "mother of so and so" e.g. Mmago Lesiba, mmago Namêdi. In many dialects of the Northern, North-western and North-eastern Transvaal the giving of a name to a new bride is regarded as an honour. This same name suggests that she will bear a child by that particular name, e.g. MmaMaropeng (mother of Maropeng), MmaSelaêlô (mother of Selaêlô), MmaNoko (mother of Noko).

2.6 As an alternative, men may be addressed by other men and women by their respective totems:

Tau or Sebata or Mminašoro (lion)

Tlou (elephant)

Kolobê (wild boar)

Kwêna (crocodile)

Noko (porcupine)

2.7 Men from initiation school deem it a pride and honour throughout their lives to be addressed by their regimental names: Matladi, Mangana, Madima, Mankwe, Makgau, Malêma. In fact they are so proud of these regimental names that they even swear by them to express their determination or truthfulness. If one of them says: *ka Matlakane ke tla go bolaya* (I swear by the Matlakane regiment that I will kill you), you know that he really means it. Similarly if you doubt his sincerity and he interjects, *ka Maswena*, then you should realise that he is telling you the truth.

### Kinship Terminology

3.0 Kinship plays a uniquely important role in the study of different cultures of the world. All societies have clearly delimited sets of kinship terms that segment the universe of all possible kinsmen into a limited number of name categories. The universal nature of the human family and of genealogical reckoning make it relatively easy to assign meanings according to genealogical ties between the speaker and the people to whom the various terms refer. No one should imagine, however, that the kinship terminology of his own culture will be similar to that of another



culture. Anthropologists must have been rudely shaken to find that in some communities people address their mother's sister as "mother", something that is unthought of an unheard of in the western world. This justifies our standpoint, viz. that a proper understanding of meaning can only be attained in the context of culture.

3.1 According to Northern Sotho culture *tatê/papa* is not necessarily a biological father, but every male old enough to be one's father is addressed as such. The same applies to *mmê* (mother), *koko/makgolo* (grandmother) and *rakgolo* (grandfather). This principle is embedded in the social organisation of the people, whereby "each person has to respect all people belonging to age-grades older than his own, irrespective of their relative genealogical status". (Mönnig, p. 240).

3.2 A distinction is made between the full brothers of one's father as *ramogolo* and *rangwane*, elder paternal uncle and younger paternal uncle, but not between the brothers of one's mother, all of these being called *malome* and their wives *mogatšamalome* (wife of maternal uncle). The term *ramogolo* also refers to one's mother's elder sister's husband, while *rangwane* also refers to one's mother's younger sister's husband. Conversely, there is no distinction between father's sisters, all being *rakgadi*; but mother's sisters are either *mmamogolo* (elder maternal aunt) or (elder paternal uncle's wife) or *mmangwane/mmame* (younger maternal aunt) or (younger paternal uncle's wife). The husband to *rakgadi* is also addressed as *rakgadi*. Likewise the children of a father's elder brother or a mother's elder sister are all *mogollê* (elder brother or sister), and of a father's younger brother or mother's younger sister all *sammê/moratho* (younger brother or sister), while all the children of a father's sister's or mother's brothers are grouped together as *motswala* (cross-cousin), disregarding age and status.

3.3 The term *morwarrê/warra* is used to designate a full brother or half-brother, i.e. the son of *tatê*, *ramogolo*, or *rangwane*; while *kgaitšedi* designates one's full sister or half-sisters (man speaking), i.e. daughter of *tatê*, *ramogolo* or *rangwane*; or one's full brother or half-brothers (woman speaking), i.e. sons of *tatê*, *ramogolo* or *rangwane*.

3.4 Two other terms remain to complete the broad picture of Northern Sotho kinship terminology, viz. *motlogolo* and *setlogolo*. Since there is a tendency nowadays to regard these words as identical synonyms it is necessary to explain the difference in meaning between them. *Motlogolo* designates the child of *kgaitšedi*, i.e. it is the term of a maternal uncle uses to refer to his sisters' children. His wife is also entitled to use it to refer to the same children. *Setlogolo* denotes a grandchild, as also grand-nephews and grand-nieces. Its diminutive, *setlogolwana*, denotes a great-grandchild.

3.5 Notwithstanding the embracing application of the term *morwarrê/warra*, i.e. designating my father's sons, those of my paternal uncles as well as those of my mother's sisters, it is, in the final analysis my father's and my paternal uncles' sons who matter for purposes of family

discussions and perpetuation of the clan; while my mother's sisters' sons, like my maternal uncles' sons, may be involved in family matters by invitation. The same applies to the term *rakgadi*, with reference to family discussions only. Mönnig (1967, p. 243) sums up the importance of Pedi kinship in these words:

"The fact that all cross-cousins refer to one another as *motswala*, irrespective of age or status, is characteristic of the free and friendly association which exists between these relatives. Taken as a whole the whole kinship terminology classifies those relatives who are superior or inferior to someone, and the behaviour should be correspondingly respectful or expecting respect."

### Linguistic Taboo

4.0 Like many other languages Northern Sotho has certain verbal taboos which cannot be used in ordinary discourse. They may be conveniently classified into two groups: euphemistic expressions and mountain language.

4.1 A euphemism is a softened, indirect expression used instead of one that seems too harsh and direct. Gustaf Stern (1931, p. 330) defines it as "a tendency to tone down or veil dangerous, indecent or otherwise unpleasant things, and also as the linguistic result of this tendency". A very large group of euphemisms is formed by expressions intended to put something in a way that shall not wound the feelings of the hearer. Here again the extent to which pleasantness or unpleasantness, vulgarity or politeness are applicable will differ from culture to culture or from language to language.

4.2 In Northern Sotho the first group of verbal taboos are words dealing with excretion. It is culturally indecent to say: *monna o ilô nya* (the man has gone to defecate) but polite to use any of the following: *o ithomilê* (he has sent himself), *o ilê kgakala* (he has gone far), *o ilê ntlê* (he has gone outside), *o ilê mošatê* (he has gone to the chief's kraal), *o ilê go bôna ngaka* (he has gone to consult a doctor), *o ilê go hlômola mootlwa* (he has gone to pull out a thorn), *o ilê pôôšê* (he has gone to the bush). In the case of a child it is customary to say: *o a fapoga* (she is deviating) or *o a tšhologa* (he has diarrhoea). Similarly it is regarded as vulgar to talk of *masepa* (faeces), the euphemism being *mantlê* (the outside things) or *mampho* (from the ideophone *pho!* (of a nasty smell)) or *mafapoga* <-*fapoga*. Even for an animal like a dog we would not use *lešepa*.

4.3 Additional euphemisms connected with excretion are: *go ntšha mêtse* (take out water), *go fahla magôtlô* (blind the rats), *go itia phoka* (beat the dew) and *go hlapologa* (be unwashed) instead of the blunt *go rota* (urinate); and *go ntšha môya* (take out air), *go thêlêwa/phonyokgwa ke môya* (be escaped by air) and *go gata katse* (step on a cat), instead of *go pshinya* (fart).

4.4 In Northern Sotho culture words having to do with anatomy and sex have remarkably affective connotations. It is considered vulgar to speak of



*nnyô* (woman's private parts) but polite to speak of *mapele* (the frontal parts) or *matlase* (the underneath parts). So also a man's private parts are referred to as *ntoto/ntotwana* (penis) or *modišana* (a small shepherd) or *moselana* (a small tail). It is thought vulgar to speak of *go nyôba* (have sexual intercourse), and the following euphemisms are used instead: *go kgopêla dikobô/mapai* (ask for blankets), *go kgopêla thethô/ntepa* (ask for a skin apron), *go alêlwa* (have blankets spread for someone), *go šišinya lepai* (shake the blanket), *go lala kgarebê* (lie on a girl). Similarly *mogwêtê/motete/tôkô* (anys) is substituted by *ka mafuri* (at the back courtyard). Exposure is severely censured and one is alerted against such a state by such expressions as *madi phatlêng!* (blood on the forehead, i.e. your fly is open), *kgômo di a timêla!* (cattle are going astray!), *kgogo di ja mabêlê!* (the fowls are eating the corn!). If anybody should see another's private parts the latter would complain: *o mpônêtše* (lit. he has seen me) or *o bône selô sa ka* (he has seen my thing).

4.5 Pregnancy among the Northern Sotho speaking people is viewed from two angles: legitimate and illegitimate. Legitimate pregnancy is expressed as follows: *ke mothwana* (she is a small person or a doll), *o gobêdi* (she is two in one), *ke motho wa kgobê* (she is a proper person), *ke kgôlê* (she is physically incapacitated, i.e. advanced stage of pregnancy), *o na le moritšhana* (she is in the penumbra), *o thokwana* (she is a little aside). illegitimate pregnancy is expressed as follows: *o senyêgilê* (she has been spoilt), *o rôbêgilê leoto* (she is crippled/maimed), *o lomilwê ke dimpša* (she has been bitten by dogs), *o gagogêtšwe ke thethô* (her apron has been torn). The general expressions covering these two categories, viz. *go ima* (conceive) and *go ithwala* (carry oneself) may imply disrespect. Normally most pregnant women are inclined to isolate themselves from the public. This gives rise to the expressions *o thokwana* and *o na le moritšhana*.

4.6 Child-birth is associated with emerging from a pool. The blunt expression, *go tswala*, is reserved mainly for animals. For human beings the following euphemistic expressions are used: *go ya madibêng* (to go to the deeps), *go imologa* (be relieved), *go hunologa* (be untied), *go fiwa ngwana* (be given a child). However the concept of fathering a child is expressed by *monna o tswala ngwana* and not *monna o bêlêga ngwana*.

4.7 The verb *fôlôtša*, used with reference to animals, expresses the idea of still-birth. The same concept with reference to human beings is expressed thus: *go boa tselêng* (return on the way), *go boa fêla* (return empty-handed), *go palêlwa* (be unsuccessful), *go phuma mêêtse* (accidentally break the calabash or water-pot).

4.8 It is interesting to note that no definite word exists to express menstruation except the use of euphemisms such as *go hlapa* (wash), *go bôna kgwêdi* (see the moon), *go ipôna* (see oneself), *go ya basading* (go to the women).

4.9 The fear of death is transferred to fear of the words connected with death. People, therefore, instead of saying *motho o hwilê* (the person is

dead) substitute such expressions as *o ithôbalêtše* (he has just slept), *o biditšwê* (he has been called), *o ilê badimong* (he has gone to the ancestors, from the belief in ancestral worship) *o ilê boikhutšông* (he has gone to the place of rest), *o ilê bohuna-matôlô* (he has gone to the place of bended knees, from the custom of burying a body by cutting the sinews of the knees and elbows to prevent the witches from later making use of these), *o hlôkagêtše* (he is no more), *o re tlogêtše* (he has left us), *o kgaogilê* (he has snapped off), *ga a gô* (he is not there), *o ikhomolêtše* (he is just quiet), *o tšêrwe ke phiri* (he is carried away by the world). Accordingly critical illness is expressed by *go bakwa le badimo* (be competed for with the ancestral spirits). *Lebitla* (grave) is referred to as *malaô* (bedding), or *ntlo* (hut/house) or *molete-mohlaêla-thupa* (a hole without a stick). The customary grave is shallow and round.

4.10 Another group of euphemisms includes indirect expressions used instead of those that appear too harsh and direct. Instead of saying: *hlatse e bolêla maaka* (the witness is telling lies), the following euphemisms may be used:

<i>hlatse e fošitšê</i>	(the witness is mistaken)
<i>hlatse e okêditšê</i>	(the witness has exaggerated)
<i>hlatse e tšhêtše taba letswai</i>	(the witness has salted the matter)
<i>hlatse e nokilê taba</i>	(the witness has enhanced the matter)
<i>hlatse e nôntšhitšê taba</i>	(the witness has enhanced the matter)
<i>hlatse e re apêilê</i>	(the witness has cooked us, i.e. deceived us)

In the case of someone older than the speaker it would be said: *o a swaswa* (he is joking).

4.11 There are several euphemisms connected with drunkenness, a fact that shows that drunkenness itself was not regarded with respect. Instead of saying *monna o tagilwê* it is more respectful to use any of the following expressions:

<i>monna o khoše</i>	(the man has eaten to the fill)
<i>monna o fihlišitšê</i>	(the man has caused to reach the brim, i.e. he has had enough)
<i>monna o gamotše/sorilê</i>	(the man has sipped)
<i>monna o hupilê</i>	(the man has filled his mouth)
<i>monna o itlhabêgilê</i>	(the man has enleavened himself)
<i>monna o boilê ka megôlô/makôpô</i>	(the man has been submerged up to the throat/eyebrows)



*monna o gapa dinku* (the man is driving sheep)

4.12 Madness in Northern Sotho is regarded as an undesirable condition. That is why *go gafa* is softened to:

*go se tšeē gabotse* (be unwell)

*go se fêlêlê* (be incomplete, i.e. in the senses)

*go hlakana hlôgô* (be mixed up in the head)

*go namêla thaba* (climb a mountain)

*go gapa tše tšhwêu* (drive white ones)

*go ja ditala* (eat the raw ones)

4.13 *Go hlatša* (vomit) is softened to *go buša* (cause to return) or *itia hôpane* (strike the iguana); while *go utswa* (steal) is softened to *go ba le dinala tše têlêlê* (have long nails), *go tšea ka mahlô/mosela* (take with eyes/tail) and *go tôpa* (pick up).

#### Mountain (Initiation) Language

4.14 Male initiation among the Pedi, as with other groups, is a sacred institution which is strictly taboo to women and the uncircumcised. The men are extremely reticent when asked about it, believing that one who reveals the secrets of the school will be punished supernaturally. Initiation schools instruct the young in the traditions of the tribe (the legends, myths, proverbs and customs), they teach the skills of hunting and fighting, inculcate the beliefs about religion, sex and responsibility to elders, and test courage by ordeals, such as whipping with lashes. The language of the initiation school is secretive, and all members of the in-group (past and present) can always communicate with one another in the presence of a member of the outer group without his understanding their conversation. The popular linguistic device of shrouding meaning is by use of euphemism and antonymy.

#### 4.15 Euphemisms:

**thipane** refers to the witchdoctor who performs the operation, cf. *thipa* (knife)

**motšabêlô** is a specially prepared leather skirt covering the private parts of initiate to protect his wound from being hurt by grass and shrubs, cf. - *tšabêla* (hide).

**kwalanlwata:** thick, unsalted mealie-meal porridge eaten by initiates and dished out into special wooden bowls. The porridge is fashioned into a pyramid with mealie-cob cores. The process is similar to making decorations (*makwala*) on a clay pot; *kwata* is a block of wood.

**tawana:** normally a small lion but "fire" at initiation school - probably a comparison of the dangers inherent in both.

**kgwale:** partridge, but in a cultural context is a mock-song aimed at exposing a family for some wrong committed during initiation school - the wrong may be food not properly or cleanly prepared or some family quarrel.

**bana ba kgwale!** chickens of a partridge, but at initiation school, a warning: "Hide yourselves! Lie flat!" - to avoid being seen by passers-by.

**ihlwana!** (small eye), but at initiation school means: "Close your eyes, we are passing" - said by an initiated person to a group of initiates.

**kgôkông** is a blue wildebeest; but *kgôkông ê ntsho* means "there is danger about" - a term used at initiation school to warn initiates to hide themselves.

**molaô** (law) but *go hlaba molaô* means to recite poems taught at initiation school, i.e. to prove that one has been circumcised.

**mêmêmê!** (tell lies), cf. bleating of a goat. Also refers to punishment meted out at initiation for such a wrong.

**kgêtla** means substitute one's brother in a marriage procession hence the modern sense of "best-man" or "bridesmaid". At initiation school the word means "to wash", probably as an indication in both cases of the passage from boyhood to manhood.

**morw'a marungwane:** literally son of the small spears, refers to *letšatši* (sun), i.e. the sun's rays compared to a shower of spears in battle.

**maru a rotoga** (the clouds are gathering), used when an intruder gets into conversation.

**go tšholla melôra** (throw away ash) means to urinate. Usually the initiates have an ashen appearance.

**phôrôhlô!** abbreviation of *phôrôgôhlô* (sparrow, characterized by chirping incessantly). At initiation school the word is used as an interjection of negation: You are wrong!

#### Antonyms:

**maruthông** (at the warm places) means *mo go tšnyago* (at a cold place).

**modungwane**, dim. of *modumo* (sound) means *lešata* (noise, clamour).

#### Ordinary Cultural Words and Expressions

5.0 As has been pointed out, meanings of words usually reflect not only the cultural behaviour of people but also the circumstances in which they live. All elements in the culture of a people are intimately related to the problems of communication. This fact has been made abundantly clear by Professor Robins (1964, p. 27), who defines meaning as follows:

"Meaning in language is therefore not a single relation or a single sort of relation, but involves a set of multiple and various relations holding between



the utterance and its parts and the relevant features and components of the environment, both cultural and physical, and forming part of the more extensive system of interpersonal relations involved in the existence of human societies."

5.1 Elaborating on our standpoint that language and culture are intimately related we shall now examine words and expressions peculiar to certain Northern Sotho beliefs and customs. Without a knowledge of the cultural context words whose use is deeply embedded in some peculiar aspect of the culture of the people would be unintelligible or only partially intelligible.

5.2 In the book of Genesis Chapter 38, Verse 8, we read:

ke mô Juda a itšego go Onan: Tsena go mosadi wa mogolwago, gomme o mo tsênêlê, fore o tsošêtsê mogolwago peu.

*English version*

Then Judah said to Onan, Go into your brother's wife, and perform the duty of a brother-in-law to her, and raise up offspring for your brother.

*Afrikaans version*

Toe sê Juda vir Onan: Gaan in by die vrou van jou broer en sluit die swaarhuwelik met haar en verwek vir jou broer 'n nageslag.

The above verse indicates that there are evident similarities between the culture of the Israelites and that of the black people of the Republic of South Africa. *Go tsênêla* (Xhosa: *ukungenela*, Zulu: *ukungena*, Venda: *udzhenela*) is a custom whereby a brother selected at a family gathering, becomes an overseer and performs the duties of the deceased. He does not marry the widow. Ideally the levir\* should be the younger brother of the deceased lest the children should prefer to claim status from their biological father rather than from their sociological father. To the Northern Sotho speaker, therefore, the words "gore o tsošêtsê mogolwago peu" not only become redundant but they also confuse the meaning.

5.3 The term *go tsênêla* is also used in connection with a child. In Northern Sotho culture it is taboo to enter the home of a new-born baby before its mother has been "doctored", usually during the first ten days. *Go tsênêla ngwana* in this context means to visit the baby's home before its mother has been strengthened medically against witches and other evil spirits.

5.4 A story is told of how a father accosted his sons who arrived back late from school and asked why they were late. The sons replied: *Re bê re sa ngwala molekô* (we were still writing a test), whereupon their father retorted: *Molekô, molekô, motho a ka le leka le ka phela!* (you talk of a test, if a person tests you can you live!). Clearly the boys thought of *molekô* in terms of schooling; but their father understood *molekô* in terms of his own cultural background, i.e. in terms of witchcraft. *Go leka* to him meant "to bewitch someone" and one who has been bewitched has no chance of

\*levir, late Latin "brother-in-law" <levirate: the (ancient Hebrew and other) custom of compulsory marriage with a childless brother's widow.

survival.

5.5 The verb *-tšhabiša* derived from *-tšhaba* (run away from) may have the following connotations: cause or force to run away from, help to run away from, take to safety:

(a) *sehlogo sa monna se tšhabiša bana ba gagwê gaê* (the man's cruelty causes/forces his children to flee from home)

(b) *gê manaba a etla re tšhabiša dikgômo* (when the enemy comes we take the cattle to safety).

Culturally, however, *-tšhabiša* means to abduct a girl with a view to marriage. When a young man has no cattle to pay lobola and has his eye on a certain girl, he waylays her and carries her forcibly to his home. The girl may be willing or unwilling, but her parents will be forced to accept the match.

5.6 The word *-seleka* ordinarily means "to disturb or annoy someone", e.g. *homola o a ntshleka* (keep quiet, you are disturbing me) or *o ntshlekile ka go mpotša maaka* (he annoyed me by telling lies). It may also mean "to be naughty", e.g. *ngwana wa gagwê o a seleka* (her child is naughty). Used in a cultural context, however, the word signifies "practising witchcraft" e.g. *o se ke wa nyala gaSeloma ka gobane ba a seleka* (don't marry into the Seloma family because they practise witchcraft). Therefore one should refrain from saying of an adult *o a seleka* because one could run the risk of being charged for defamation of character in the traditional court.

5.7 *Ala* and its reverse form *-alola* can only be fully understood from a cultural context. *Ala* means to spread the mat and blankets (usually at night) in preparation for sleeping. *Alola* means to roll up the mat, fold the blankets and suspend them on a wooden hanger (*mphêgêlô*) in a hut. The two processes imply that the sleeping room is also used for other purposes such as preparing food during the day and in the evening. This is in contrast to western cultures whereby specific rooms are provided for the preparation of food and for sleeping, and a bed is usually made up in the morning.

5.8 *Ditšhila* commonly means "dirt", but in a cultural context means "impurity", especially "ritual impurity", and those who have acquired it must cleanse themselves lest they infect those with whom they come into contact. The circumstances under which one acquires impurity are so wide and embracing that very few people can avoid it. For instance, if a man has intercourse with a widow or comes across somebody from a funeral, it is believed he will contract *makgoma*<*-kgoma* (touch), a kind of illness following upon contamination with impure persons. Other contaminations may result from intercourse with a menstruating woman, a woman who has had a miscarriage or an abortion, or a pregnant prostitute, in which case the man may have his sexual organ put out of action. The Northern Sotho speaker will then say of him: *o khutlilwê*<*-khutla* (hit, hurt, bump against).



5.9 *Dutula* and *boola* ordinarily mean "to shave", but in a cultural context both words acquire greater significance. *Dutula* means to shave the head at the beginning of abstentions as a mark of mourning for the deceased; - *boola/bêola* at the end of the period of abstention, when a feast is held, relatives of the deceased are cleansed of their impurity and the relationships of the group are reconstituted. These rituals symbolize that as hair is usually associated with impurity, it must be shed to avoid contaminating other people. Secondly, they indicate that the bereaved have been deprived of the warmth and protection of the deceased. Thirdly, as hair is sometimes regarded as the seat of beauty it must be shorn from the women lest they should attract the attention of men during the period of abstentions. That is why strict precautions are taken to ensure the proper conduct of widows during this period.

5.10 Similarly two words are used in connection with the burial rites of the Northern Sotho speaking people. These are *mogôga*<*yôga* (pull, drag) and *tlhōbōša*<-*hlōbōga* (give up, despair, sympathise with, give condolences, pay last respects). Culturally *mogôga* refers to a special beast (a black bull in the case of a Pedi chief) slaughtered at his burial, as the skin must cover the body of the deceased. The concept *mogôga* actually denotes a corpse or a carcass, or the bones thereof, found in the veld, i.e. that which has enjoyed no formal burial. For instance, when one baboon dies the head of the troupe will drag the carcass and throw it into a ravine where no intruders will reach it. Hence the expression, *tšhwêne ga e topše mogôga* (one cannot come across the remains of a baboon). In this context *mogôga* derives from the dragging of the carcass. This process is similar to that relating to the slaughtered beast, i.e. the meat is not salted, the bones are not broken but are buried with the corpse and the skin covers the corpse which is then dragged into the grave. *Tlhoboša*, on the other hand, denotes a beast slaughtered either at the end of the mourning period or later when the extended family pays its last respects to the deceased. The meat may either be eaten on the spot or carried away by the relatives to their respective homes.

5.11 The word *-tshelologa* gives us another interesting facet of Northern Sotho beliefs. *Go tshela* means "to cross over" or "to step over", e.g. *monna o tshela noka* (the man crosses the river). Culturally, however, the word bears further affective connotations. If a boy goes to attend initiation school before his elder brother, it is said, *o mo tshetše*, i.e. he has usurped the brother's birth-right and therefore has reduced his elder brother to an inferior position. In addition, if a child who wets his bed at night should jump over the outstretched legs of an adult, it is believed he will thereby infect the adult with bed-wetting, thus disgracing him. To remove this infection, the child should immediately retrace his steps by crossing backwards. This is called *go tshelologa*, intransitive reverse form of *-tshela*. These connotations of *-tshela* are always associated with degradation and always demand to be reversed to signify an act of contrition. Matsepe (1969, p. 25) has aptly applied this sense of the word in Leilane's report:

"--- a bê a bolêla le gore  
Nthumule yêna o sa tlile go mo  
tshelologa ka gê a lefišitše  
Tšhidiyamotse".

[he (Lefehlo) even said that Nthumule will abjectly ask pardon from him since he fined Tšhidiyamotse.]

5.12 Some Northern Sotho words are associated with the agricultural and pastoral pursuits of the people. The word *letšema*<-*lema* (plough) basically means a hoeing party, but may also include any other working party requiring community co-operation on a voluntary basis. The owner of the task or project prepares food or drink for the occasion, and the job is completed in a spirit of goodwill signifying one good turn deserves another. Loosely applied the word *letšema* might denote a large group of people with a common objective.

5.13 The word *mafiša* derived from *-fiša*, which means to loan one's cattle to someone else who has no cattle or has very few, so that he may enjoy the benefit of possessing cattle. The act is motivated by the desire to help the less fortunate and less gifted fellowmen and the fear of witchcraft which may be prompted by the envy of one's neighbours. It may also be influenced by the desire to hide one's possessions for fear of plundering or exploitation. Although the caretaker enjoys the service of the cattle; consuming the milk, and using the oxen for ploughing, he has no ownership rights. Hence the expression: *mogama-kgômo ya mafiša o gama a lebêlêtsê tselâ*, i.e. he must always be prepared to surrender them to the rightful owner when the occasion demands it.

5.14 The word *go loma* ordinarily means "to bite", but culturally it means to taste the first fruits or crops, a right that is accorded to a chief or a senior in the tribe, thereby formally declaring to his followers that the fruits or crops are ready for consumption. Sometimes the ritual is referred to as *go loma ngwaga* (bite the year). To outwit the enemies (witches or spies) the chief may be substituted by a counterfeit usually known as *kgōši ya lerōtsê*. His duty is to taste the first fruit even before the chief to ensure that it is not poisoned.

### The Proverb

6.0 The last aspect to receive attention will be the proverb. George M. Forster (1970, pp. 304 - 305) has this to say about proverbs:

"Proverbs represent a validation of accepted values, a criticism of behaviour that does not conform to those values, a rule book for successful living, and a continuing commentary on the scene."

We shall keep this definition in mind as we analyse a few proverbs, selected at random, to illustrate their cultural significance.



6.1 In typical Pedi culture discrimination is not institutionalized. A stranger is usually accepted in any home and accorded the warmest hospitality. In fact his visit is regarded as a benefit more to the hosts than to himself. Two Northern Sotho proverbs underline this philosophy: *alêlang moêng kobô, motla-le-kgômo ga a tsebje* (lit. prepare a comfortable bed for the visitor, because he may be the right person to get you out of difficulties; cf. "to entertain an angel unawares") and *moêng, tlaa ka gêšo, re jê ka wêna* (lit. stranger, visit our home, so that we may enjoy unusual delicacies through you).

6.2 *Boyakgômo ke boboa-kgômo* (lit. where a beast goes is where a beast comes from, i.e. one good turn deserves another). Culturally, when a beast is slaughtered in a particular family, every member of the extended family receives a legitimate portion. Likewise when one member of the extended family slaughters a beast, he must give to all other members of the family their respective legitimate portions. Similarly when a member of one's regiment pays *magadi* (marriage cattle), one is bound by culture to contribute. The significance of these binding contributions is to knot the whole family or regiment or community together so that in time of stress and strain one can have recourse to one's family or regiment or community. It is this philosophy that is behind the saying, *Boya-kgômo ke boboa-kgômo*, which is usually applied when one member defaults.

6.3 *Mosadi ke tšhwêne, o lewa mabôgô* (lit. a wife is a baboon, she is eaten the hands, i.e. the most important quality to look for in choosing a wife is her industriousness rather than her beauty or good looks). The concept of a good wife is clearly revealed in this proverb: she must be hard-working - keeping the home trim, feeding the children, tilling and harvesting the lands in the absence of her husband either on the battlefield or in labour centres. Over and above this she must make herself available for communal tasks within the family or community. Another aspect of her duty is child-bearing, which takes precedence even over industriousness. This is the basis of the practice of prearranged marriages whereby the would-be husband need not even know the prospective bride before marriage. She may be ugly or crippled but as long as she fulfils the above duties she is acceptable. This makes child-bearing and industriousness the major qualities to look for in selecting a wife. The proverb is often applied to wives who complain about the demands of running a home or who are inclined to lighter pursuits only.

6.4 *Lebitla la mosadi ke bogadi* (lit. the grave of a wife is at her in-laws, i.e. once married, permanently married). The proverb implies that in Northern Sotho culture divorce is not countenanced except in very few cases involving witchcraft. This is motivated by the custom of *magadi* which, like money, seem to change hands frequently, making a refund very difficult. On the other hand, restriction of divorce maintains the equilibrium of relationships in the community. This custom is so strictly adhered to that even when a husband dies his wife is not allowed to remarry, although provision is made for her further procreation. Almost invariably this proverb is last advice given to the bride by her closest of kin before she leaves for her

new home.

6.5 *Legôtlô le lefa ka setopo* (lit. the rat pays with its own carcass, i.e. everyone must suffer for his own misdeeds). According to Northern Sotho culture the law of retribution is "an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth". That is why in the original culture a life was demanded for another life with total disregard of extenuating circumstances. This applies specifically to murder cases, in which usually men and young men are involved. Where reimbursement is involved, then *ngwana gê a ôba molato o ôbêla tatagwê* (the father is responsible for the misdeeds of his child). In cases involving corporal punishment (usually boys and young men), the wrong-doer must suffer the punishment. The proverb, therefore, is the pronouncement of judgement when corporal punishment is to be applied.

6.6 *Hlabang tlôu ka diloka, tšhukudu mošimane!* (lit. if you stab an elephant with thistles even a rhinoceros becomes but a small boy, i.e. many a mickle make a muckle). The elephant is generally regarded as the largest animal that needs many spears to fell it; but if hundreds of thistles are used, The Northern Sotho people maintain, it is possible to kill it. Myriads of thistles would render even the ferocious rhinoceros innocuous. As can be seen this proverb is based on the Northern Sotho military pursuits. By implication many hands make light work. Therein lies the concept of community co-operation.

## Conclusion

7.0 The intricacies of language shown above already indicate that misunderstandings are apt to arise even where they may not be intended. For instance, honorifics are not simply a mode of address but imply expected attitudes towards people for a particular social stratum, particularly the age-group. Hence revulsion at rough handling of an elderly person by a younger person, who happens to be in authority. Impudence of that category is strongly discountenanced.

7.1 The Black family is very extensive. Leave to attend a funeral of a brother is often exasperating to a white employer, as *brother* embraces even categories that, according to him, cannot boast of any propinquity of blood. In addition objection to registering such *brothers* or their children as dependants of a black man by local authorities, the receiver of revenue, insurance companies or other benefit societies often causes consternation. In fact kinship ties are so prominent that one would rather lie to a court to save a kinsman without qualifying as a liar. Lastly in courts of law these kinship terminologies create a lot of legal wrangles, as misunderstandings may be created where they were not intended - sometimes resulting in the conviction of an innocent man. This also is true of misunderstandings of cultural words, expressions and the proverbs which indicate the dominant philosophy of the people who created them. As Joseph Raymond (1954, p. 57) rightly observes: "As a man's speech mirrors his thoughts, so do a people's proverbs reflect dominant attitudes and patterns".



7.2 Mr Vice-Chancellor, I now have the honour to accept the chair of Northern Sotho in the University of the North and I give you the assurance that I will exploit to the full this most intriguing aspect of language study - sociolinguistics.

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