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THE RELEVANCE OF THE SETSWANA PROVERB TO  
THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY SPEAKER OF SETSWANA

**Abstract:** The most important knowledge that people have is knowledge borne from long experience and passed from one generation to another in their languages about their local environment and surroundings. Local proverbs are one of the ways in which local knowledge is embodied and transmitted in a community. Mieder (1980.119) defines a proverb as “a short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals, traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed and memorable form which is handed down from generation to generation.” Jang (1999.83) sees proverbs as statements which represent traditional wisdom within shared cultural experience in a way that summarizes issues of importance to local communities. Jang’s definition underscores “shared cultural experience” suggesting that the meaning of a proverb could be obscure and irrelevant unless one shares in the knowledge, experience, wisdom and understands the language and culture underlying it. The question is; does the modern day speaker of Setswana share and understand the imageries, philosophies and language used in these statements? This paper questions the position and relevance of proverbs to the 21<sup>st</sup> century speaker of Setswana who does not share the same cultural experience as the creator of the proverbs. Specifically, the paper interrogates some of the commonly held views of the proverb such as its old and fixed structure and its ability to cut across generations and ages. These questions basically compel us to interrogate the relationship between indigenous and contemporary knowledge.

**Keywords:** African, Setswana proverbs, contemporary speaker of Setswana, intertextuality, modernity, truth

***Introduction and objectives***

Proverbs are part of African heritage and culture and therefore constitute local indigenous knowledge. Indigenous knowledge creates an information base for a society which in turn ensures sustained communication and development. This knowledge is

sustained by passing it from one generation to another but it is eroded or lost with the passage of time and changes in society. The major challenge for speakers of African languages is how to make this knowledge relevant in their contemporary lives. In many parts of Africa, proverbs are seen as diminishing heritage that is associated mostly with the rural and old population. This paper attributes the low usage and fading away of proverbs to some views that we have about proverbs. Rather than be viewed as old and fixed statements, proverbs need to be seen as dynamic structures that can accommodate internal creativity, experimentation as well as contact with external forces.

There are many definitions of a proverb though none of them enables us to identify positively a sentence as proverbial. Finnegan (1970.393) defines a proverb as “a saying in a more or less fixed form marked by popular acceptance of truth tersely expressed in it.” Mieder (1985.119) defines a proverb as “a short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals and traditional views in a metaphorically fixed, memorable form, which is handed down from generation to generation.” Jang (1999.83) says it is a “statement which represents traditional wisdom within a shared cultural experience in a way that summarizes issues of importance to local communities.” Sheba (2006.vii) says proverbs are apparent truths reflecting human experiences. These definitions, collectively or individually, elucidate several commonly held views of proverbs; old, fixed, image laden expressions which contain wisdom or truth within a shared cultural experience. Such characterizations or views of the proverb are sometimes problematic given the fact that we live in dynamic and variable societies which may and may not share the same cultural experience that inspired the creation of the proverbs. This paper probes some of these widely held views about proverbs. Using examples from Setswana proverbs, the paper examines two central characteristics of the proverb: their old and fixed imageries and their ability to express the truth. Basically, the paper asks how an old, fixed, metaphorical statement could express contemporary wisdom or truth and what or whose truth a proverb expresses? In other words, the paper attempts to find out the extent to which the Setswana proverb is relevant to the 21<sup>st</sup> century speaker of Setswana.

*Old wine in a new wineskin*

Bagwasi (2003.329) argues that Botswana society, like many societies, is experiencing rapid environmental, social and economic changes due to increasing industrialization, literacy, urbanization and Englishization. Evidence from history suggests that before the era of industrialization in which we live, human beings lived by gathering and hunting. Thereafter, they moved into the agriculture stage which consisted of domesticating animals and growing crops. Factories, industries, and computers came in the modern stage. Owomoyela (2005.12) argues that “proverbs are deduced from close observation of and reflection on life, life forms and their characteristics and habits, the environment and natural phenomena.” Adeleke (2009.463) has also observed that Yoruba proverbs are used to recall past events in the life of the community which created them and in which they are used. The events include wars, famines and other social experiences which are characteristic of the history or past of such a community. And indeed, the images and symbols used in Setswana proverbs, or many African languages for that matter, depict mostly the past, the hunting-gathering and agriculture stage. There are simply no imageries or symbolisms of the contemporary age. There are no proverbs that contain images of contemporary objects such as cars, airplanes, telephones, computers and televisions. This observation is intriguing not only in terms of demonstrating the age of the proverb but also in as far as it shows an averseness of the Setswana proverb to employ modern objects as its symbol.

Akporobaro and Emovan (1994) state that proverbs are determined by the socio-geographical situation of an area. The nature of the imagery in which they are expressed reflect the nature of the natural environment of the people who created the proverb. Amongst communities where farming is the dominant occupation, the local proverbs will reflect this occupation and where fishing is the case the local proverbs will reflect that lifestyle. Setswana proverbs mostly contain images of animals, beasts, snakes, plants and trees on which the lives of the creators of the proverbs were dependent. Bagwasi (2003.329) argues that there are a lot of imageries of domestic animals (especially cattle) in Setswana proverbs because domestic animals, especially cattle, play a major role in the social as well as economic lives of many

traditional Batswana. Proverbs that depict Batswana's pastoral life include:

1. *Mmapodi ga a ipone se se mo tlhogong* (a she goat cannot see what is on its head). The proverb means that a person cannot judge himself or herself.
2. *Mosima o o duleng kgomo ga o ke o thijwa ka bobi* (a hole from which a cow came out of cannot be hidden by cobweb). This means that one cannot conceal a big thing.
3. *E e masi ga e itsale* (a cow that produces a lot of milk will not have an offspring that also produces a lot of milk). Children do not usually inherit their parents' good traits.
4. *Kgomo ga nke e nyela boloko jotlhe* (a cow does not discharge all its dung). This means that a people do not usually tell the whole truth.
5. *Bopodi go kgonana ba ba dinaka* (in a fight, goats with horns are a good match for other goats with horns). When it comes to conflicts people with the same kind of character are a good match for each other.

These proverbs are widely known and used by many speakers of Setswana, not just pastoral farmers who have probably observed their animals depicting the same type of behavioral patterns depicted by the proverbs. Even urban and modern day speakers of Setswana who are less familiar with animal behavioral patterns have come to accept the wide application of proverbs and their symbols. This is evidence of the vitality, currency and transient nature of the proverb to transit from one context, generation or meaning to another.

There also exist those proverbs that depict old hunting-gathering and agricultural practices in Setswana society. The imageries and symbols used in these proverbs are mostly old and not familiar to the 21<sup>st</sup> century speaker of Setswana, see proverbs 6, 7, 8, and 9 below. Most 21<sup>st</sup> century speakers of Setswana have never heard of such words as; *sefifadu*, *nkgotua*, *lerutla* and *makubelo* contained in them. Modern Setswana dictionaries do

not contain these words making it difficult for young and contemporary speakers of Setswana to decode or understand proverbs containing such images.

6. *E a re go longwa ke sefifadu ore o bona pilo o tshabe.* (Once a person has been bitten by a 'creature' at a certain place they often avoid the place. The proverb means that when something negative has happened to you, you often try to avoid putting yourself in a similar situation. This has a similar meaning to the English "Once bitten, twice shy").
7. *Mmotlana ga a bege boroku, o itlhoma loe bonye bo fetoge nkgotua.* (A young hunter does not declare tree sap in fear that it might turn into 'something useless'. This refers to an unlucky person whose good deeds often turn bad).
8. *Moamoga tshwene lerutla o e lebatsa ka mogwang.* (The person who has stolen a baboon's possession often appeases it by giving it something. The proverb means that when you deny or take away something precious from a person they never forget about it until you make up for that in some way).
9. *Mothedi wa lekuka o salelwa ke makubelo.* (The person who has been maintaining the sack in which sour milk is made often eats 'whatever is left in the sack'. The proverb means that there is often a reward for the one who has worked hardest).

Teachers of Setswana at both primary and secondary school find proverbs with archaic words challenging for young and urban speakers of Setswana. This challenge could be a demonstration that the contemporary Setswana proverb user is not part of the "shared cultural experience" in which these proverbs were created. Shared knowledge refers to the knowledge of any people who have lived together for a certain period of time. Promoters and proponents of culture will argue that even though the images used in these proverbs are archaic the meanings are not because proverbs do not express their meanings literally but metaphorically. For that reason proverbs that have archaic forms still carry

meanings that are contemporary and relevant. However, this paper argues that imageries and symbols are as important as their meanings. It is often easier for one to decode and interpret an image or symbol that they are familiar with. Thus the use of familiar symbols and images could facilitate the use and learning of proverbs in Setswana and other African languages.

The Botswana imported education system is also not really well equipped to teach Setswana proverbs and their cultural importance to young people. Often, learners pick up a few proverbs from proverb competitions or they are left on their own to acquire them from their grandparents at home. However, during examinations or tests, these contemporary bilingual and cosmopolitan Setswana learners are asked to explain or provide examples of proverbs that they have hardly studied. The learners' reactions and responses in these situations is often consistent with modern day thinking; they often try to decontextualize and unfix the Setswana proverb and situate it in their modern lives by infusing contemporary images and symbols into it. Mieder (1993:90) argues that alterations of existing proverbs, known as anti-proverbs, which sometimes result in "mere humorous word play represent a critical reaction to the world view expressed in seemingly antiquated proverbs." He further argues that these anti-proverbs represent a fascinating interplay between tradition and innovation in the use of proverbs. Mieder gives a couple of such proverbs in English;

10. A new broom sweeps clean but an old one knows the corners.
11. Garbage in and garbage out.
12. You can judge a car by its colour.
13. It takes two to quarrel but one gets hurt.

Unfortunately, anti-proverbs are generally not tolerated and appreciated by teachers and adult speakers of Setswana. The learners' attempts to modernize and decontextualize the proverb are often ridiculed, mocked and dismissed by Setswana language practitioners and the general Setswana speaking community, mostly because the proverb is believed to have a fixed structure and content which do not ordinarily change. Finnegan (1981:10)

has also observed that, except for minor variations, “the wording of Bantu proverbs seems to be relatively fixed in outline so that these general patterns are maintained or recalled in their various citations.” Setswana proverbs occasionally allow some stylistic and dialect variations, but for the most part their structure and lexicon are fixed and rigid. Though there is no published study on the use of proverbs by young Batswana, some Setswana teachers, especially from English medium schools in the capital city Gaborone have, for amusement purposes, collected and compiled “amusing and modernized” proverbs from their learners. Table 1 below, shows some of the learners’ modified and modernized Setswana proverbs that contain words from other languages, such as English, and contemporary images such as makeup, tarmac and The Voice and DIS which are found in their modern society and environment.

Table 1: Modified Setswana Proverbs by learners of Setswana in Gaborone

LEARNER’S VERSION	ORIGINAL VERSION
14. <i>Meno masweu, thanks to Colgate.</i> (White teeth, thanks to Colgate)	<i>Meno masweu a bolaya a tshega.</i> (People who smile at you do not necessarily like you or wish you well)
15. <i>Mosadi tshwene o batla make-up.</i> (An ugly woman needs a makeup)	<i>Mosadi tshwene o jewa mabogo.</i> (An ugly woman is useful for the work that she does with her hands)
16. <i>Sekukuni se bonwa ke the Voice/ DIS.</i> (A sneaky person is often caught by the Voice Newspaper or the Directorate on Intelligence and Security (DIS))	<i>Sekukuni se bonwa ke sebatladi.</i> (A sneaky person is caught by another sneaky person)
17. <i>Tsela kgopo ga e na setontere.</i> (A windy road has no tarmac)	<i>Tsela kgopo ga e latse nageng.</i> (A windy road will still get you to your destination)
18. <i>Mmangwana o tshwara tshelete ya maintenance.</i> (A mother collects money for maintenance)	<i>Mmangwana o tshwara thipa ka fa bogaleng.</i> (A mother will do anything to defend her child)

The only concern with these modified versions could be that they tend to represent literal rather than metaphorical interpretations of the proverbs. However, this paper argues that they need to be taken seriously in so far as they represent a serious attempt by

the young 21<sup>st</sup> century bilingual speakers of Setswana to move the proverb from the past into the present, modernize it and make it relevant to their new experiences. Mieder (1993.90) also argues that “it is important to recognize that proverbs are no longer sacrosanct bits of wisdom laying out a course of action that must be adhered to blindly.” Failure to recognize these modifications perpetuates conservatism of the proverb that I believe is responsible for the stunted growth of the proverb. Conservatism, according to Toelken (1979.35), “involves all those processes and forces that result in the retaining of certain information, beliefs, styles and customs and the attempted passing of those materials intact through time and space in all channels of traditional expressions.”

#### *Intertextuality of the proverb*

As an aspect of language, a proverb cannot remain completely unscathed and conservative, the new technologies and practices that continuously affect language are bound to transform and modify the proverb so that it is adaptable to today’s context. Despite its fixed structure, the contemporary Setswana proverb users have managed to make it fluid and flexible so that it fits different meanings and mediums. The Setswana proverb now exists in both an oral and written form, it is used both in the traditional Setswana settings such as *kgotla* and in modern mediums such as internet and advertising. It is also used in English conversations. This ability of the proverb to move from the voice of the oral performer to the modern writer and author, to different languages and modes of transmission is evidence of its intertextuality. Julien (1992.15) explains inter-textuality of the proverb as “a continuous dialogue of works of literature among themselves which helps in expanding the field of genres in which proverbs and other linguistic elements may be examined and researched.” Mokitimi (1996.55) argues that the occurrence of proverbs in various genres should be seen as a strategy for enhancing the macro-texts in which proverbs are found. These new uses and mediums of the proverb also illustrate the dynamism of the proverb. Toelken (1979.35) sees “dynamism as comprising of all those elements that function to change features, contents, meanings, styles performances and usage as a particular traditional event takes place repeatedly through space and time.”

In contemporary Zimbabwe and many parts of Africa, the proverb has permeated virtually all economic activities; by means of radio, television, and newspaper. Proverbs are employed to promote retail businesses, industrial products, transportation industry and preventive health practices and many other ventures. Proverbs are used as titles of programs and infused in commercial advertisements to encourage certain behaviors or to summarize the advert's primary message (see Tatira 2001.30). In Botswana, the proverb "Pitse e sule ka disale" (a horse lays dead with its saddles), which means that something is plentiful and free, is used by many retail businesses to advertise a sale or good bargain. There is also a Botswana Television magazine program that is called "Sedibeng," a short form of the Setswana proverb "Sedibeng go iwa ka tsela" (you get to a well using a road), the proverb means that one has to follow a certain path to get to their destination. There is even a football club affectionately known as "Moya goleele," a short form of the Setswana proverb "Moya goleele o lefa ka marapo" (a long distance traveler needs a lot of stamina). These examples demonstrate new uses of proverbs. The new uses demonstrate that the advent of both electronic and print media did not kill the proverb, rather it has extended its use from regional localities to national and global arenas.

Further, because of its broad and general nature, the meaning of a proverb has been difficult to fix. Users of a proverb are often able to manipulate its meaning so that it fits their context and intended meaning. For example, in typical traditional Setswana egalitarian communities, the proverb "*Monna selepe o a adimanwa*" (A man is an axe which is sharable) will be interpreted to mean that a man should serve his family and extend his services to his neighbors who require his help. Thus, a family that does not have a man may ask the man next door to chop fire wood for them because "a man is an axe that is sharable." But in line with traditional Setswana polygamous practices, the proverb can also be interpreted to mean that a man can sleep with more than one woman. Thus a man who is cheating on his wife may justify his actions by saying that "a man is an axe that is sharable."

Bagwasi (2003) discusses the use of Setswana proverbs in English conversations. This new use of Setswana proverbs in English is one of the ways in which proverbs have adapted to

new trends. However, Bagwasi (2003:332) claims that when the proverb changes habitat, say from one medium to another, one language to another, problems of misrepresentations and misunderstandings sometimes arise. She states that during the British protectorate, the British sometimes used Setswana proverbs to help them understand and resolve local controversies such as those concerning chieftaincy or governance. For example, they found the Setswana proverb “Lentswe la kgosi le agelwa mosako” (build an enclosure around the chief’s word) pertinent and suitable for explaining the powers of the local chiefs. The British interpreted and understood the proverb to mean that the “chief’s word is law” which empowers him to do whatever he wants. This interpretation led to the chiefs’ abuse of power being tolerated and justified by the British administrators who assumed and understood that the chiefs’ actions were in accordance with the native’s philosophy which is enshrined in the local proverb “Lentswe la kgosi le agelwa mosako.” The British interpretation led to a lot of dissatisfactions and arguments among the local activists who wrote letters to newspapers and the British administration to clarify the meaning of the proverb as seen in the excerpt below:

Tshekedi’s claim that he was above and beyond the laws of the protectorate can be substantiated by government documents which say “the chief’s word is law.” Now, this is not a Secuana proverb, where the administration got it, I do not know. Our proverb has no such autocratic meaning. The Secuana expert officials must have adopted it wrongly. Lentsue la kgosi le ageloa losaka means that the chief’s promise will be fulfilled. Yet the chief’s word is law has become a familiar decision of the protectorate courts in any matter concerning the ruling chief with his subjects even where European residents are involved.

*(Extract from a letter by Simon Ratshosa in Star Newspaper, October 7, 1933).*

When local proverbs are used in a different language, such as English, they become decontextualized and isolated from the local culture which is embodied in the proverb. For Batswana

natives, “Lentswe la kgosi le agelwa mosako” could not be interpreted to mean the chief’s word is law because there are other proverbs and cultural contexts that contravene that meaning. Bagwasi (2003.333) argues that in the 1930s, when such letters were written, Batswana chiefs wielded a lot of power, they were the sole rulers of their communities, were responsible for all the land allocation and awarding of mine prospecting permits. However, they could not do as they liked because the length and success of their reign was dependent on the approval of their communities, hence another Setswana proverb which says “*Kgosi ke kgosi ka batho*” which means a chief is only a chief through the will and approval of his people. The two proverbs are related and are often used together. The latter proverb serves as a reminder to the chief that he got to his privileged position through the approval and will of the people and thus he must reciprocate by fulfilling the promises he gives them. All this knowledge and information is lost when the proverb moves from one language to another. Bagwasi (2003.328) argues that since the content of a proverb transmits a particular culture and certain shared values users of the proverb from a different language and generation must grapple with a cultural mindset which is not theirs when considering the meanings of the proverbs.

The arguments above show that both the forces of conservatism and dynamism are at work on the proverb. The conservatism of the proverb is found in the rigidity of its structure and content and its dynamism is found in its uses, meanings, mediums and languages. Bagwasi (2003.239) argues that the contemporary proverb users in Botswana are both conservative and dynamic. They are protective over the structure of the proverb and employ traditional concepts of proverb performance, but modify them according to the functional and aesthetic needs of their audience and their language. Innovation and modification of the proverb is one way of integrating indigenous knowledge and traditional knowledge systems and ensuring that indigenous knowledge continues to be passed on to future generations. Use of proverbs to solve contemporary problems legitimizes old beliefs, values, and approaches and provides incentives to solve problems with local ingenuity and resources which in turn promotes cultural pride.

***Proverbs as an expression of truth***

Many definitions and descriptions of proverbs underscore the truth value of proverbs. For example, Tatira (2001.231) says that “proverbs have a feeling of universal *truth* because humans everywhere are shaped by past experience.” Finnegan (1970.393) defines a proverb as “a saying in a more or less fixed form marked by popular acceptance of *truth* tersely expressed in it.” Mieder (1985.119) says it is “a short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, *truth*, morals and traditional views ...” Delano (1973.77) says that “Yoruba proverbs are self-evident *truths*, which help to drive home a point or describe a situation in a few striking words.” It would seem from the above statements that the word ‘truth’ is bandied a lot in definitions and descriptions of proverbs though there is very little agreement as to what truth is. Truth is synonymous with several English words such as; genuine, honest, loyal, faithful and original, but what does the word truth mean?

It is not the intention of this paper to embark on the colossal task of defining truth, but there is a need for us to work out some common understanding of the phenomenon of truth since it is an integral part of a proverb and arguments about the authoritative, guiding and didactic force of proverbs really hinge on this truth value of proverbs. Owomoyela (2005.12) argues that since proverbs are considered to express accepted truth, their use in discussions or arguments indicates an appeal to established authority. Malunga and James (2004.3) also argue that proverbs are guidelines for individual, family, village and community behavior built upon repeated real experience and observations over a period of time. Because proverbs are seen as truth, they are internalized and become conscious or unconscious standards, socialization maxims that reinforce certain behaviors and attitudes in the community which uses them. The above arguments provoke further interrogation of the “truth value” of a proverb.

There are many theories of truth but this paper will make reference to the constructivist theory which holds that truth is constructed by social processes, is historically and culturally specific, and it is in part shaped through the power struggles within a community. According to this theory, perceptions on truth are viewed as contingent on convention, human perception and social experience. It is for this reason that Foucault (1970)

finds any attempt to see truth as an objective quality problematic. He finds truth to be something that is in itself embedded within a given context, power struggle, shifting through various episteme throughout history. The above theory clearly suggests that truth is neither absolute nor universal. This view of truth is relatable or pertains to truth in proverbs because truth in proverbs is relative, it is a social construct, just like race and gender and it is not permanent and therefore often difficult to apply across generations and contexts. Mieder (1993.13) agrees that proverbs only make sense in a given situation or context and that we always choose proverbs that suit the situation best, an indication that proverbs do not have universal applicability. Mitchison and Pilane (1967) also see the truth as being relative to culture, history, language and society.

Proverbs usually reflect one point of view, one kind of experience and one type of truth and there are many situations or contexts in which that view or experience is not applicable and is questioned and even refuted. That is the reason many languages have proverbs that are diametrically opposed to one another, this is to accommodate the different views and vicissitudes of life. Yankah (1994.129) says this kind of opposition represent the “different classes of men and the possible absence of unanimity in a society’s view of life.” Users of language often reject the use of certain proverbs when they feel that they are used out of context or they do not agree with them. This means that whenever society’s perceptions, views and experiences change, the applicability and relevance of certain proverbs can also change. For example, in these days of democracy and equal rights, there have been a lot of objections and reluctance by Batswana women to accept the relevance and applicability of proverbs that demean them especially where issues of gender, leadership and marriage are concerned. Nhlekisana (2009.142) condemns such proverbs, sees them as encouraging male dominance in Setswana society and propagating negative influence against women. Further, she laments the fact that scholars often extol proverbs as value laden statements which are repositories of social and cultural wisdom but ignore their sexist tone.

The arguments above clearly show that proverbs do not express universal truth but express an opinion or view that others, especially from a different generation or gender, may not agree

with. Arora (1994.7) agrees that the level of authority that a proverb has differs from one family or community to another. Sexist proverbs that are commonly highly debated in Botswana include proverb 19 below which suggests that a woman has to be beautiful, if she is not, then she can be made useful by making her use her hands to provide for her family. Proverb 20 compares a woman to a dog which is attracted to whoever gives it a bone. Proverb 21 says that women cannot keep a secret, so they cannot be trusted with confidential information. Proverb 22 says that women talk too much and their talk brings about conflicts between people.

19. *Mosadi tshwene o jewa mabogo*. (A woman is a baboon whose usefulness lies in the use of her hands). The proverb means that an ugly woman/wife can make herself useful by using her hands to provide for her family.
20. *Mosadi ntsa o okwa ka lerapo*. (A woman is a dog who is enticed by a bone). The proverb means that a woman is materialistic, goes after any man who can support her materially.
21. *Basadi ga ba na thwadi*. (Women cannot keep a secret).
22. *Loleme la basadi lo lothanya metse*. (Tongues of women cause conflicts between villages). The proverb means women talk too much and their talk brings about conflicts between people.

On the other hand, proverb 23 bestows upon a man unlimited freedom and prowess to have many partners or get involved in multiple sexual relationships. Proverb 24 encourages a man to show bravery at all times, even when he is hurt, crying or showing emotions is for women, for men it is a sign of weakness. Proverbs referring to men legitimize their authority, bravery and domination which are central in power relations.

23. *Monna phafana o a faapanelwa*. (A man is a calabash of beer which is sharable). The proverb means that a man is like a calabash of beer which is passed from one beer drinker to another, that is, he can manage multiple sexual partners).

24. *Monna ga a lele go lela mosimane.* (A man does not cry, only boys cry). A man should not show emotions, lest the emotion be seen as a sign of weakness.

Some proverbs pertaining to leadership have also been challenged and contested. For example, in today's democratic societies many people have difficulties accepting proverb 25 below;

25. *Ga di nke di etelelwa ke manamagadi di ka wela ka seloma.* (Cattle should not be led by a cow (female) otherwise they will fall into a ditch).

Nhleakisana (2009.143) argues that this proverb negatively affects women's participation and access to leadership positions in Botswana. History has shown that females can lead successfully. Indira Ghandi of India, Queen Elizabeth II of Britain, Joyce Banda of Malawi and Kgosi Mosadi Seboko, chief of Balete in Botswana, are just a few examples of female leaders. Equally, in today's democratic societies where there is regular consultation and there are governance structures that are made up of several people Proverb 26 will be seen as undemocratic and downright dictatorial.

26. *Poo ga dinke di nna pedi mo lesakeng.* (There cannot be two bulls in one kraal). There can only be one leader in a community.

The existence of such proverbs is an indication of a certain point of view that was prevalent in patriarchal societies at a certain time. Increasingly, such views and societies are coming under heavy attack. If we accept Foucault's argument that truth is embedded within a given context, it is about power and shifts throughout history, then it is clear that men's domination in patriarchal societies had determined what was true. Feminist authors around the world vehemently criticize sexist proverbs. Asiyabola (2007) argues that most Yoruba proverbs are biased against women, they portray them negatively; as sexually immoral, extravagant and responsible for most societal ills. Hussein (2005.6) also argues that African proverbs demonstrate the complex relationships between power and sexuality and hegemonic masculinity in African societies. These proverbs are challenged

by many 21<sup>st</sup> century women who refuse to accept them as being applicable or relevant to their lives.

Proverb 27 will nowadays be seen to contravene certain public health standards. Before Batswana pastoral farmers were taught about all the deadly transmittable diseases in cattle and other domestic animals, they could eat meat from sick animals because it was considered a waste to throw away meat of a cow, no matter what the cow suffered from, as illustrated by proverb 27 below;

27. *Lebitla la kgomo ke molomo.* (The grave of a cow is the mouth), meaning that meat from a cow cannot be thrown away, it has to be eaten).

Though Tatira (2001.230) argues that proverbs are able to survive in today's economies because of "the genre's sense of timelessness, the feeling that they represent comprehensive summaries of past experiences, truths that have been tested by earlier generations and offer an informed empirical view," the above examples show that proverbs are not as timeless as we have been made to believe. In fact, they are applicable within given contexts, situations and time periods. For example, women and men's roles have changed in modern times. Proverbs that try to enforce old gender stereotypes are often met with reluctance. Proverbs should be able to address these new roles of women. The examples used in this paper indicate that some of the existing proverbs have become debatable, an indication that the society's perception and view about certain things is changing.

### ***Conclusion***

The intention of this paper is not to discredit the proverb and render it irrelevant in today's society but rather to draw attention to some indefinable views that we have about proverbs. Chesaina (1991.26) argues that most proverbs are as relevant and as contemporary as they were when used by previous generations. Tatira (2001.236) also argues that though the situations to which proverbs are applied to are new, the social context is not. He argues that the fact that proverbs often comment on widespread human experiences enables them to remain relevant and fit any place, time and function in spite the technological advancement of a particular community. The innovative uses of the proverbs

are proof of its continuity and survival in the modern age. The paper agrees with these sentiments but cautions scholars in their characterization of the proverb as truthful and fixed. The truth value and the fixed structure of the proverb need to be qualified. The so called anti-proverbs should be recognized and accepted by speakers of Setswana. Mieder (1993:58) argues that proverbs are used in innovative ways that force them to be changed in order to fit the demands of the modern age. "Changing times and situations require forms of expression that the traditional proverb can longer supply." If language provides an indication of a society's thought pattern which is ever changing, then proverbs should also be allowed to change accordingly. The arguments above urge us to review existing perceptions and definitions of proverbs with the view to free the proverb so that it more efficiently and effectively represents contemporary times.

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