

## A Reflection on Setswana Proverbs in Botswana's National Psyche and Nationhood

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### Abstract

Botswana's fiftieth anniversary of Independence, celebrated in 2016, is indeed a milestone achievement worthy to be celebrated. This paper argues that Setswana proverbs are one of several factors that have contributed to peace and democracy in Botswana. Other factors include but are not limited to good governance, economic stability, domestic political dynamics, and international relations. The paper analyses a few Setswana proverbs to show how they have been used to express the Setswana world-view, values, beliefs, norms, and attitudes which contributed to the peace and democracy which has prevailed in the country for the fifty years after attaining Independence. It should be noted that the development plans of Botswana have always been based upon the four national principles of democracy, development, self-reliance and unity. The fifth principle of *botho* was added later. It is also acknowledged that the development of the country has also had some negative impact on people's attitudes, such as the erosion of the traditional extended family values/system giving way to individualism. Nevertheless, the role of proverbs in nation-building is still fundamental.

### Introduction

Although Botswana has not been without serious developmental challenges, the country has been viewed as the shining example of democracy and economic success story on the African continent (Samatar 1999; Acemoglu *et al* 2002 and Leith 2005). These developmental challenges include high levels of economic disparities, HIV/AIDS pandemic, corruption, high unemployment and curtailment of civil liberties in recent years (Good 2008 and Magang 2015). Notwithstanding these challenges, Botswana has also been considered one of the most peaceful countries on the continent: there has been peace and democracy in Botswana since it attained its independence from British colonial rule in 1966. Though there are many factors such as good governance, economic stability, domestic political dynamics, international relations and so forth that contributed to this peace and democracy, this paper focuses on proverbs. It argues that part of the success of the aforementioned is due to the oral traditions of Botswana – above all proverbs.

Proverbs are an integral part of the oral traditions of Botswana as they play many functions in the society. According to Ruth Finnegan proverbs are 'a rich source of imagery and succinct expression, encapsulating abstract ideas and allusive wording, usually in metaphorical form' (Finnegan 1981:11). Proverbs are also seen as guidelines for individual, family, village and community behaviour, built upon repeated real life experiences and observations over a long period of time (Malunga and James 2004). They have also been described as 'the wisdom of many, the wit of one' (Meider and Dundes 1981:61). This paper analyses a few proverbs to show how they have been used to express Setswana worldview, values, norms and attitudes. The values to be discussed are peace, freedom of speech, co-operation, interdependence and humanness. It is believed that the utilisation of these values in the daily lives of the Botswana has consequently contributed to the peace and democracy, and the nation that Botswana is to date. Proverbs have many functions amongst which is to promote peace in the home, community, nation and internationally. Proverbs are repositories of knowledge, encoding wisdom and are used in different domains in Botswana. Inherent in many of the proverbs is the belief that peace is a fundamental human right.

A proverb can be multi-contextual in application. It can be used in various contexts such as at the interpersonal level, for example, between husband and wife, or between a parent and a child. It can be

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used at public forums such as the *kgotla* (tribal meeting place in Botswana or the tribal court), churches, sporting activities, institutions of learning and the workplace. As speech acts firmly rooted in the cultural context of the speech community, proverbs are context-specific occurring only as communicative responses to real-life, everyday events and experiences (Finnegan 1981). Therefore, for a proper understanding of the meaning of the proverb, one has to know the context in which it was used; otherwise its meaning can be misinterpreted.

In terms of literature numerous studies have been carried out on African proverbs. Finnegan (1981) discusses the various uses of proverbs in African societies. Seitel (1981) sees proverbs as the strategic social use of metaphor, while Gaie (2002) shows that proverbs have multiple meanings depending on the context in which they are used. Yankah (1989) discusses the aesthetics of proverbs in traditional communication and Agbaje (2005) explains the place of Yoruba proverbs in the understanding of Yoruba philosophy and education. On the other hand, Daniel *et al* (1987) argue that taken as a whole, the community's corpus of proverbs provides a mechanism for storing and disseminating the speech community's attitudes, beliefs, values, philosophical assumptions, virtues and vices, and, in general, much of its world-view. According to Mbiti (1975) there are proverbs which teach new things to the hearer and others that warn against evil conduct. He further says that some proverbs are used to encourage people in doing something, while others show what is bound to occur in certain circumstances.

Proverbs fit into particular situations of life and most of them have been fundamental to human experiences and reflections throughout the ages. They are, therefore, a major source of African wisdom and a valuable part of African heritage. In addition, proverbs serve many functions in African societies. It has also been argued that 'more often than not, scholars have confined themselves to normative functions of proverbs that is, being vehicles of advice, caution, warning etc' (Miruka 1994:76). Miruka also notes that proverbs can perform other functions such as, facilitating verbal communication, and beautifying someone's speech. He also observes that proverbs 'act as mirrors through which we glance at the society, its attitudes and thought processes' (Miruka 1994:77-78). Proverbs are a summary of people's philosophy of life. They are also largely didactic used to warn, caution, advise, criticise, console, encourage and so forth. A few studies have been carried out on proverbs and peace in Africa. For example, Agbaje (2002) shows how proverbs can be used to resolve conflicts among the Yoruba people. He states that 'proverbs can occur in various contexts but they seem to be particularly important in situations where there are conflicts. The reconciliatory effect is one of the prescriptive functions of proverbs in society' (Agbaje 2002:237). Further, Oguejiofor (2006) is of the view that proverbs and myths are resources for peace in Africa. Malunga and James's (2004) study examines how African proverbs can be used in organisational peace building. Yankah (1986) examines the use of proverbs in judicial processes among the Akan of Ghana.

Furthermore, proverbs can be used to warn or advise someone or a group of people in conflict. The use of proverbs in such situations can reduce the inherent tension and conflict leading to restoration of peace between belligerent parties. It has been posited that 'in most of our countries, we have to promote national unity and socio-economic development by means of statecraft as well as by drawing on the indigenous experience and wisdom of our people' (Alexander 1996:21). This study adds to the existing but limited literature on the use of proverbs in the context of peace, democracy and nation building.

For methodology this paper uses examples of Setswana proverbs that were derived from several sources. Some of these proverbs were collected during *kgotla* meetings in Tlokweng between 2012 and 2014, especially where development issues were discussed. Some of the proverbs which deal with familial conflicts and conflict resolution were collected in 2002 while the author was conducting research for her PhD. We also used M.O.M. Seboni's book, *Diane le Maele* (1980) and Moabi Kitchin's *Motlapelle a Reng?* (1995) to select proverbs that were relevant to the study. As a native speaker of the Setswana language the author's insights and knowledge of the language also came in handy to choose the proverbs for this paper.

The next section analyses and discusses six proverbs to show that the values reflected in these proverbs among others contribute to peace and democracy Botswana is renowned for globally. The principles or traits under discussion are humanness, peace, freedom of speech, cooperation and interdependence.

As noted, the development plans of Botswana have always been based upon the four national principles of democracy, development, self-reliance and unity, with a fifth principle of *botho* being added in 1997 when the government produced a long term vision for Botswana known as 'Vision 2016' (Republic of Botswana 1997). The Vision 2016 document set out its vision for Botswana as an educated, informed nation; a prosperous, productive and innovative nation; a compassionate, just and caring nation; a safe and secure nation; an open, democratic and accountable nation; a moral and tolerant nation and a united and proud nation (Republic of Botswana 1997). Botswana, like all other nations is undergoing rapid changes due to various factors such as urbanization and globalization. However it is important to appreciate and cherish the cultural values that have contributed to its success.

### ***Motho Ke Motho Ka Batho* as Mark of Humanness**

The proverb *motho ke motho ka batho* means that a person is a person because of other people. A rough English equivalent might be that 'no man is an island'. The word *motho* (person) indicates singularity and individualism whereas *batho* (people) indicates plurality and in this case communality. The proverb encourages people to create harmonious relationships with others in the community, the society and the world at large. The philosophy behind the proverb is to emphasize the concept of *botho* (humanness). Generally, Botswana consider *botho* as the most vital quality of a human being. As already mentioned, this is one of the national principles encapsulated in Vision 2016. *Botho* refers 'to the concept of a person who realizes his or her full potential both as an individual and as part of the community to which he or she belongs' (Republic of Botswana 1997:2). It concerns the values that contribute to the well-being of others and of the community. It also discourages individualism and encourages collectivity and representation. In the Setswana culture the individual is expected to behave in a manner that portrays the virtues the society upholds. It is the role of the community to help shape and define the person. A person has the right to be respected, to be helped, protected, loved and so forth. These are human rights that have to be respected irrespective of one's gender, social status and ethnicity to mention a few.

Furthermore, this proverb clearly emphasizes the need for respect of persons, the importance of the community, personhood and morality (Mnyaka and Motlhabi 2005). To be human is to affirm one's humanity by recognising the humanity of others and, on that basis, establish respectful human relations with them. *Botho* embodies all the invaluable virtues that society strives for towards maintaining harmony and the spirit of sharing among its members. *Botho* is fundamentally about values, with respect at the centre; respect for others, for difference and diversity. If this principle is observed, then the nation will be developed from all angles. The proverb also instils positive values on members of the community because they would see themselves as part of a larger whole responsible for the development of the country.

This proverb can be used in situations where someone is perceived to be individualistic or self-centred. For example, we heard a father who lives in a different village from his son's quote this proverb when he was told that his son never helps nor visits other families in the village when they have bereavements. The disappointed father rebuked his son for his behaviour and told him that what he was doing was wrong and unacceptable in the community. He told his son that next time the bereavement might be at his place, and the villagers would not come and give him the necessary support. The father quoted this proverb to make the son realise and understand the importance of interacting and relating with other people because no man is an island. To be a human being is to be a person who not only relates to, but also loves and serves other people. However, the behaviour of the son in the above context indicates that concept of *botho* is slowly being eroded and replaced by people being self-centred and individualistic. In addition, the extend-

ed family has been replaced by the nuclear family which also tends to make people to be individualistic and materialistic in nature.

### ***Ntwa Kgolo Ke Ya Molomo as Denoting Peace and Non-violence***

The next proverb is *Ntwa kgolo ke ya molomo*, literally translated as 'The big fight (or war) is of the mouth' ('To jaw-jaw is always better than to war-war'). *Ntwa kgolo ke ya molomo* means that the best way to solve a conflict is through dialogue or to talk about it rather than resort to physical fighting or violence. In other words, one is more likely to 'win' by speaking than by fighting physically and violently. This proverb can be used in almost any context where there is conflict. The word *ntwa* (a fight or war) is symbolic of an undesirable deed; *kgolo* (big) is an adjective which describes that the kind or size of war being talked about is not small but big. On the other hand, *molomo* (mouth) is small, compared to the big war; therefore, a small thing can be used to resolve a big thing. The mouth is used to speak and through speaking no problem is impossible to solve. The proverb encapsulates the Batswana philosophy of peace building through dialogue and underscores the importance of negotiation in peace building. It also discourages physical violence. It further emphasizes reconciliation and encourages non-confrontational approach to conflict management and resolution. Once there is conflict be it in the home, community, an organisation or nation there is a need to strive for peace. In the Setswana culture peace is restored through consultation, negotiations, reconciliation, diplomacy and mutual agreement. It should be noted that this proverb does not always refer to where there is physical fighting but can be used even where there are disagreements on a topic being discussed.

People usually quote this proverb in different contexts such as in the home especially when there are family disputes, at *kgotla* meetings, and in organisations or institutions. An old woman told us that this proverb can be used in the home or at interpersonal level. She said that some time back her neighbours (a husband and wife) had a quarrel or disagreement over something at night. After arguing for a long time the two engaged in a physical fight. The commotion and screams from their house woke her up so she went to their house to see what was happening. When she got there the two related their story and in a bid to restore peace and reconcile them she quoted this proverb to comment obliquely on the conduct of the couple, with implied advice or rebuke. She said she hoped and believed that after her intervention the couple would reconcile.

The next scenario is at an organisational or institutional level. On a few occasions over the years students at the University of Botswana (UB) strongly complained about certain issues pertaining to their welfare, and it became apparent at some of their meetings that they made a decision to boycott classes. Whilst on strike, some students would go on the rampage and damage UB property. To avoid further destruction to property the UB management closed the university. This proverb was quoted on numerous occasions by government officials, the media and members of the public who rebuked the students of taking the law into their hands and being destructive instead of dialoguing with management. The students, on the other hand, argued that they resorted to violence because management was not listening to their grievances such as late payment of allowances, poor quality of food served in the refectories, unavailability of books and expensive books at the book store. However, resorting to violence hardly ever resolved the students' problems as the UB administration instead unceremoniously sent them home and consequently losing time for their lessons. This shows how important dialogue is in resolving conflicts.

From the above discussion it is evident that the quest for peace makes reconciliation and forgiveness necessary. As Obi Oguejiofor (2006) rightfully argues, 'there is a realization that if peace is to reign, human beings must engage one another in mutual attempt to make peace a reality. Forgiveness and reconciliation is viewed not only as beneficial to one party in a dispute, but to all concerned, and in fact to the whole community'. Therefore, dialogue and negotiation are very essential in creating and maintaining

peace. Most Batswana are skilled and experts at negotiation. They use this skill and expertise to arrive at a compromise when resolving conflict or settling a dispute. This shows that there is no dispute that cannot be resolved through talking or at least where a compromise can be reached.

However, this does not mean that historically Batswana never had inter- and intra-tribal conflicts and warfare. At any rate Batswana are known for peace and as Mompoti Merafhe, founding general of the Botswana Defence Force (BDF) and former Vice President of Botswana, writes in his autobiography the BDF made the country very proud as it gained the respect and trust of local people during peace-keeping missions in Somalia, Mozambique and Lesotho (Merafhe 2015). By contrast armies from major powers such as the United States, Italy and even South Africa became unpopular with the local communities. During Pope John Paul II's visit to Botswana in 1988 he described the country as an island of peace in an ocean of turmoil (Email communication with Christian John Makgala). He was referring to Botswana which at the time was surrounded by hostile white minority regimes in apartheid South Africa and Namibia. There were also vicious civil wars going on in Angola and Mozambique. Again it was in 1988 that President Quett Masire's plane was shot while flying over Angola (Masire 2006).

### **Freedom of Speech**

There are many Setswana proverbs that help to maintain peace in the community by encouraging freedom of speech such as *mmualebe o abo a bua la gagwe*. This proverb is literally translated as the one talking bad is talking his/her mind. It basically means everyone is allowed to freely speak his or her mind. The word *mmualebe* is a compound word with *mmua* being a noun which comes from the verb *bua* (speak/talk) and *lebe* (bad/ugly) is an adjective. *La gagwe* is a possessive showing that the words spoken are those of the speaker. In other words, a person should be given an opportunity to air his or her views irrespective of what others think, agree or disagree with him or her. The person should be given due respect by being listened to; he or she should not be disrupted as that would be regarded as disrespectful. This proverb encourages freedom of speech in the society especially where critical issues be they political, social, economic, religious, health related and so forth are being discussed. It allows people to express their feelings without fear of retribution or punishment. Batswana believe that when people express their feelings they release stress and consequently are able to live peacefully. It also encapsulates the philosophy of democracy and advances the thinking that communication is a basis for building and maintaining relationships. This proverb can be used in various contexts such as the public domain, political platform and the domestic realm.

One of my informants, in order to show how this proverb could be used, recalled a village development committee (VDC) meeting where development projects that were needed in the village were being discussed. He said the first speaker argued that priority should be given to building a health centre because the villagers travelled long distances to the nearest facility, and in some cases people died along the way. Another speaker argued that they should instead build a bridge across the river because when the river is flooded their children were not able to go to school which was on the other side of the river. A third speaker argued for installation of electricity in the village and another said the roads in the village should be tarred. Everybody was given a chance to express their views and opinions, and to explain why each thought their project was more important than others. It so happened that some people thought that electricity was not a priority so they tried to stop the person who came up with the idea from talking. The chairperson told them to listen because everyone has the right to air their views. He said '*Nnyaa bagaetsho a re mo reetseng kana Motswana a re mmualebe o abo a bua la gagwe*' ('No my fellow citizens let us listen to him/her because Motswana says each person has the right to voice his/her opinion'). If people are given a chance to air their views and opinions, it creates a peaceful atmosphere during the deliberations and this consequently leads to the successful implementation of development projects.

The proverb further expresses the ideals of human dignity, respect, tolerance, justice, equality and

equity. People should value cultural difference and affirm the pluralism of the individual, community and nation. In theory the proverb challenges all forms of discrimination in the society through the promotion of democratic principles of social justice. If people are given the freedom to express their views and opinions, they feel dignified and respected. Freedom of speech is a principle of democracy so when discussing development issues, be they infrastructural, economic, social, educational or political this philosophy helps to mobilise people and for them to rally behind a specific goal. It is a fundamental right that creates a sense of belonging and togetherness. It does not discriminate, thus leading to peaceful co-existence of people. Although Botswana is a multilingual and multicultural nation, there is peaceful coexistence between the various ethnic groups in the country. However, this does not mean that every ethnic group is content with the status of its language. As Chebanne notes elsewhere in this collection only Setswana is recognized by the government as the national language and English as the official language, while languages of ethnic 'minority' groups are not recognised, which could lead to their demise. Nevertheless, these issues are openly discussed in Botswana and solutions are suggested.

Another proverb that encourages freedom of speech is '*Mafoko a kgotla a mantle otlhe* (literally translated as words at the communal meeting place are all beautiful or worthwhile). The proverb basically means that everybody has a right to speak and be listened to irrespective of how those present view what he or she says. In Botswana, the *kgotla* is a place where community discussions are held. The *kgotla* creates an open and democratic atmosphere where everyone may contribute freely to the discussion. People exchange their views, opinions and ideas openly at this forum. It should be noted however that in the past, the *kgotla* was a men's domain; women and youth were not allowed to attend *kgotla* meetings let alone speak at them. According to Mgadla and Campbell, 'in pre-colonial period, they (*dikgosi*) looked to *dikgotla* as a place where they gave the public a chance to voice their opinions but not to make the final decisions on policy questions' (Mgadla and Campbell 1989:56). Again in the past ethnic and social status could undermine one's contribution because even if someone from a poor background or ethnic minority did speak at the *kgotla* their views could not influence the final decision. Ngcongco states that Bangwaketse did not allow Bakgalagadi to speak at *kgotla* meetings. He says 'a Mokgalagadi who attempted to speak at a particular *kgotla* meeting was rudely pulled down by Bangwaketse who said: *nna hatshe o tla re tlholela* (literally meaning sit down you will be spying on us)' (Ngcongco 1989:46). He further says that 'elders in Kweneng stated that Bakgalagadi were not as a rule expected to speak at a *kgotla* even though they were free to attend like any other Motswana' (Ngcongco 1989:46). However, despite conservatism in a few quarters things have since changed, and men, women and youth can attend *kgotla* meetings and express their views and opinions freely.

In the Setswana cultural context listening to multiple voices is highly recommended and encouraged. This philosophy is encapsulated in the proverb *Mafoko a kgotla a mantle otlhe*. The proverb clearly encourages tolerance of dissenting views in debating public affairs. *Mafoko* (words) does not refer to the actual words spoken but rather to the point of view of the speaker. The *kgotla* is symbolic of any gathering where issues are discussed. It could be in the home, the *kgotla* itself, freedom square (political rally), corporate board meeting, or elsewhere. *Mantle* is an adjective which denotes beauty, however, in this proverb it does not refer to beautiful words only but rather to anything that is being said at that particular gathering. This is complemented by the use of the quantitative word *otlhe* (all) to show the collective response of allowing everybody to say something. Normally, after everybody has been given a chance to speak, a decision is taken based on the discussions. This is a virtue that Botswana are proud of as most feel that decisions are not imposed on them but rather consultative processes are followed. Before a decision is taken members of the community or the nation at large is given a chance to express their views and opinions. According to the historian Christian John Makgala the nature of the British colonial policy of indirect rule in Botswana differed with other colonies because of consultation between the rulers and the ruled through the *kgotla* (Makgala 2004). He argues that this consultation ensured that the ordinary people had a stake in the decisions made and this

prevented uprisings and confrontations which took place in other colonies where consultation was not part of governance. Makgala uses taxation as an example.

This proverb also implies that everyone has a natural instinct to voice or express his or her opinions, and that everyone has to be given an opportunity to do so freely, free from rejection, ridicule or humiliation. Inherent in this proverb is the ability to share information and respect and appreciation of other people's points of view. This principle of verbal participation encourages leaders, developers, colleagues, mediators and so forth to welcome different perspectives, opinions and inputs from people who can make meaningful contributions to the welfare of the community and society or nation. Different perspectives are welcomed in an attempt to improve people's immediate wellbeing, as defined by their political, economic and cultural conditions. There is no moment during the deliberations when a *kgosi* (chief) or any other authority can make a decision without critically assessing and analysing people's opinions. This, therefore, creates a spirit of communality and togetherness among the people, consequently leading to peace and democracy in the country.

### Cooperation

The next proverb is *Kgetsi ya tsie e kgonwa ke go tshwaraganelwa*, which literally translates as 'a bag of locusts is better carried by many people'. The actual meaning of the proverb is that work becomes easier and manageable if done collectively and co-operatively. *Kgetsi ya tsie* (bag full of locusts) is metaphorically used to indicate the different tasks that people may be expected to perform. The word *tshwaraganelwa* (two or more people holding something together) comes from the verb *tshwaragana* (unite). In this instance, it means that if somebody tries to do something on his or her own, chances of him or her succeeding are limited. In other words, unity is strength. Perhaps, it should be indicated that this has long been a standard slogan of the trade union movement worldwide. So important is this slogan that 'Unity is Strength' has been adopted as a motto on the logo of Botswana Manual Workers Union –the country's biggest trade union. '*Kgetsi ya tsie e kgonwa ke go tshwaraganelwa*' also forms part of the coat of arms for the Gaborone City Council. The proverb emphasizes the need to cooperate with one another and is based on the three principles of self-reliance, unity and communality. It also discourages individualism and encourages people to work together. It should be noted that there are similar proverbs such as *Mabogo dinku a a thebana* and *Moroto wa o esi ga o ele* which both denote collectivity and unity as opposed to individualism.

This proverb is used in various contexts such as political, economic and social. It is also closely linked to development issues. For example, at a meeting called by the VDC to discuss what infrastructural developments were needed in the village, the chairperson introduced the topic and led the discussions. The VDC together with members of the community agreed to build a health centre. Various members of the community were given tasks to perform related to the project. After three months another meeting was called to evaluate the progress made so far. The VDC reported to the *kgosi* (chief) that no work has been done since the last meeting. The *kgosi* became angry and disappointed and reminded his people that '*Kgetsi ya tsie e kgonwa ke go tshwaraganelwa*', meaning that as the people directly affected by the project and who would consequently benefit from the project, they needed to actively take part. It was understandable why the *kgosi* was angry because such a project not only brought infrastructural development to the village but it also helped with socio-economic development as the community would have this highly valued and much needed facility. The facility may also create employment opportunities for members of the community.

The *kgosi* said he quoted this proverb in order to stress the importance of co-operation, unity and productivity among his community. He also said the proverb stresses the need to relate and work closely and co-operatively in a responsive and responsible manner. This is well summed up by Ngwane (1996:5) who says that 'Africans are beginning to realize that nothing can be achieved and maintained in the continent, without their own active involvement in and selfless contribution to peace initiatives'. It is highly unlikely that any form of development would succeed without the co-operation and involvement of the beneficiaries

of the project. Whatever difficulties a community, nation or the world at large faces, there is need to co-operate and work together.

The example of the *kgosi's* annoyance also demonstrates that despite the existence of this proverb and others mentioned above co-operation is not always achieved in the communities and organisations. For instance, it is quite common for organisations and institutions such as churches, marriages, trade unions and political parties to split. Nonetheless, generally some Batswana are actively involved in community and national projects which consequently lead to the development of almost all areas in the country.

### **Interdependence**

The last proverb, *Matlo go ša mabapi* encourages the spirit of interdependence, mutual responsibility and communality among members of the community or society. It is literally translated as 'houses next to each other burn'. The proverb basically means that each person or household has some responsibility to their neighbours and relatives or those close to him/her. In other words, you should be concerned about the welfare of your neighbours because next time it might be you needing their assistance. Embedded in this proverb is the concept of *botho* discussed earlier in this paper. *Matlo* (houses which were traditionally thatched huts) denotes hospitality, the security of the home and the actual space an individual lives in. It also refers to interdependence, mutual co-existence and responsibility. These are closely related to the five national principles derived from Botswana's cultural heritage, and are designed to promote social harmony or *kagisano* (Republic of Botswana 1997:2). *Go ša* (to burn) could literally mean the house burning but it also implies the problems or circumstances that one may find himself or herself in. *Mabapi* (next to something) denotes proximity and the importance of being neighbourly and compassionate. This is in line with one of the pillars of Vision 2016 that of being a compassionate, just and caring nation (Republic of Botswana 1997:8). This can be achieved by giving support to the poor, caring for the sick and ensuring that people have access to resources regardless of ethnic origin, gender, disability or misfortune (Republic of Botswana 1997:8). In other words, people have to be willing and available to help each other when the need arises. It is highly likely that if a house is burning the flames may catch the house next to it. So the proverb really means that if the problems of one's neighbours are not attended to or resolved they would spread or spill to others just like if there are many houses close to each other if one catches fire all are likely to be burnt too.

This proverb does not mean one should interfere in other people's private lives but that they should lend a helping hand when the need arises. For example, if a neighbour passes away, one should be there to console, comfort and give emotional support to the remaining members of the family. In other words, the envisaged spirit of interdependence and communality serve as motivation for hospitality since the host is banking on the belief that the other person will reciprocate, and that they are each other's keepers. In that way the proverb also discourages selfishness and individualism.

Furthermore, this proverb can also be used at national and international level to try and instil peace and stability in neighbouring countries. For example, during the liberation struggle that swept through southern Africa, Botswana was a host country for political refugees from South Africa, Namibia, Zimbabwe (then Rhodesia) and Angola. As a neighbour to these countries, Botswana had no option but to give nationals of these countries asylum. This proverb was quoted many times by ordinary people, *dikgosi* (chiefs) and political leaders to warn Batswana that what was happening in those countries may one day spill into Botswana, and if citizens are not hospitable to these people they will do the same to them then.

Another example is that in recent years the neighbouring Zimbabwe has been going through political and economic crisis. This situation has resulted in many Zimbabweans crossing the border into Botswana to look for jobs and security. Most Zimbabweans become economic refugees in Botswana. Unfortunately, some Batswana exploit them and generally ill-treat them (Nyamnjoh 2002). For example, they make them work long hours and pay them very little; some do not even pay them after they finish the job assigned to them.

More recently, a lot of crime that is taking place in the country is attributed to Zimbabweans even where it is Batswana who commit the crime (Makgala 2006). As literature indicates, whereas Batswana have traditionally been tolerant to foreigners the challenges brought by some immigrants into the country have made some Batswana xenophobic (Makgala 2006). However, some community and political leaders have often appealed to the citizens to be tolerant of foreigners, particularly from strife-torn African countries, in line with the Setswana proverb *matlo go ša mabapi*.

In the past the extended family system was very common in Botswana. However, recently, this system has declined and has been replaced by the nuclear family system. The extended family system accorded Batswana the opportunity to be communal, united and to care for one another. On the contrary the emergence of the nuclear family has brought about the spirit of individualism and competition. This consequently has an adverse effect on the spirit of *botho* and the other values that Batswana cherished and identified with which also led to the peaceful, democratic and developed nation it is today.

### **Conclusion**

From the above discussion it is clear that proverbs are an integral part of the Setswana culture. This paper has shown how proverbs have been used to express Setswana world-view, values, norms and attitudes. It is evident that the utilization of values such as peace, freedom of speech, co-operation, interdependence and humanness in the daily lives of Batswana has contributed to the peace and democracy and the developed nation that Botswana is to date. Upholding the philosophical underpinnings inherent in proverbs has led Botswana to be a peaceful country that is admired by many. I believe this was achieved because Batswana have *botho*, they are a compassionate and caring nation; they listen and respect each other and more importantly they uphold the principles of democracy, development, self-reliance and unity. Furthermore, the proverbs discussed in this essay show that peace is not an individualistic effort but rather a communal collective effort. Since proverbs can be used in multiple contexts, embracing and including families and communities to create an environment that is supportive of multiple perspectives, experiences is very crucial in nation building. It is of paramount importance that the Botswana nation should continue to uphold these principles for the benefit of today's generations and generations to come.

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