

***A DICTIONARY OF SETSWANA PERSONAL NAMES: BY THAPELO J.
OTLOGETSWE AND GOABILWE N. RAMAEBEA***
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It is not every day that a dictionary causes much excitement in any context. However, *A Dictionary of Setswana Personal Names* does so by speaking about something as generic as a name. The book can be divided into three sections. Firstly, there is what can be described as a preamble, which is obviously the shortest section, followed by a bit of technical stuff that will be of particular interest to lexicographers as it provides a framework for the content itself. Finally, there is the sections on the names, which take up the bulk of the publication.

The preamble includes a preface and a table of contents, something unusual in a dictionary, but it is very useful for navigating through the book, particularly if one is impatient to search for their names. The preface involves some background on one of the authors as well as a teaser as to the fascinating aspect of Setswana names which are “a society’s way of documenting its tidal rhythms both at a personal level and at a broader societal level” (vii). It is also interesting to note that Setswana names are derived from a whole spectrum of scenarios that include “political and tribal wrangling, socio-economic struggles, beliefs, rituals, fears, local gossips” (vii). The preface is well balanced in that it does not bog down the reader in unnecessary scholarly information. One can appreciate that the authors were mindful that their publication would appeal to both the scholar and the simply curious.

The technical stuff as mentioned earlier is where one finds the introduction, but it is not anything that weighs heavy on the eye. Here the authors provide much needed information on what goes into making a Setswana name so to speak. There are no theories provided but there is a well-structured section that is part historical and part cultural. For instance, under the section of ‘Setswana Names and their Motivations’ one learns that names are repositories of the belief systems of the people. There are names that speak to gender roles and help an outsider understand the relationship between words and their perception of the male and female sex. One learns, for example, that females can have names like *Mosegi* (one who sews) and males can have names such as *Mogakolodi* (advisor/counsellor). In this respect one understands that names are an attempt to firmly ground one gender into traditional sex role expectations. The book provides useful information into how our names have evolved over the years. Considering this, there is a fascinating section on ‘The most common 100 Setswana names’, and the fact that neither *Mosegi* nor *Mogakolodi* feature in this list is a testament to how Batswana seem to be moving away from sexist names. In addition, the top five common Setswana names (*Mpho*, *Thato*, *Tebogo*, *Kabelo* and *Lesego*) speak more to the influence of Christianity into Setswana culture. These names are for the most part unisex which adds to their appeal. This section

on the 100 common Setswana names, taken from a corpus of about one million names, is a must read for both the statistician and the curious of mind.

The third section, the names, is the *crème de la crème* of the publication. This is where you find the names you would expect to find and those you never thought are names. There are about 8500 names which means that a substantial number of names have been captured. Perhaps a wonderful aspect of this dictionary is its user-friendly nature. Names are classified alphabetically as well as thematically. Further, you also have a semantic classification – a personal favourite of mine. Here, one can ascertain if one is named from words related to God or less palatable words that speak of bodily discharge! The section is frank and unapologetic showcasing how rich the Setswana language is. The various classification methods are ideal for primary as well as secondary schools as it allows for one to explore the text from several options. Those who are challenged by the morphology of words are also catered for. For instance, whether you believe a word is *lekgoa* or *lekgowa* (a white person), you will find both versions there. It must be noted that this in no way makes the dictionary unsure of how words are meant to be written. The authors have a whole section on spelling conventions, northern Setswana pronunciations as well as a bit on names that use an old Setswana orthography (pages xiv – xvii). One appreciates that there is a lot to naming than what one hears.

It needs to be mentioned that this dictionary is a pioneer in the market and so, for all its charm and usefulness, some are bound to have certain misgivings. For instance, if you are expecting to find phonetic symbols next to the word you will be disappointed. You will also not see how the name is divided into syllables. These technical aspects take nothing away from the dictionary. It is unique and clearly promotional in terms of gathering support and love for the Setswana language. It states on the blurb that it is a text that “provides a window for native Setswana speakers and non-speakers through which they can look into the beautiful tapestry of Setswana naming tradition.” The book will appeal to scholars, academics and even tourists. It has a wide appeal, and it is not bulky, meaning that one can easily carry it about for quick reference. The other languages of Botswana will do well to take a leaf from Otlogetswe and Ramaeba. Next time one asks, “What’s in a name?” the answer might be right at hand!