

# Examining the Relevance and Philosophical Significance of Some Northern Sotho Proverbs in the Context of COVID-19: A Sociocultural Perspective

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**Abstract:** Proverbs have long been serving as a tool for shaping human being's life. They serve as a philosophical tool for social cohesion among other socio-cultural significances. Though some critics regard them as ancient, proverbs are still fulfilling the philosophical purpose(s) in the COVID-19 era. Their philosophical nature and meaning remains relevant in many contemporary life occurrences. Observing how people self-conduct themselves and share information about the pandemic, it was imperative for the study of this nature to be documented to ease communication among people during and post the pandemic. It is against this backdrop that this paper aimed at contextualising the meaning(s) of some Northern Sotho proverbs in the COVID-19 epoch and examine how they are relevant to the pandemic's situation and happenings. Qualitative research approach undergirded this study in the sense that the relevance of traditional Northern Sotho proverbs is tested against the global status quo (COVID-19 times). The study adopted Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural theory as its lynchpin to enable a critical and thorough examination and assessment of the importance of language (through proverbs) in the COVID-19 context. Relevant Northern Sotho proverbs were purposively selected due to their significant role in the COVID-19 epoch. The proverbs were synthesised and analysed thematically to reveal their relevance and philosophical purpose during and post the pandemic. The study ultimately argues that language, through proverbs as its fundamental aspects and ideological tools, remains a major philosophical source of communication among living folks.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, Proverbs, Philosophy, Communication, Language, Northern Sotho.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Northern Sotho proverbs, like those of other global languages, are an embodiment of wisdom in many ways. Fundamentally, proverbs are regarded as social modes of communication (Sebola & Abodunrin, 2021). Communication among people in the COVID-19 era is of paramount importance. Language as a fundamental custodian and source of communication plays an integral part towards people's safety during COVID-19 era. Proverbs are cornerstone of every language and therefore they are seen as a reliable mode of information transmission. Kgobe (1989) postulates that communication and transmission of knowledge depend almost entirely on word of mouth. Thus, proverbs were orally transmitted from one generation to the other (Lee, 2015; Mamaleka & Makgopa, 2021; Sebola & Abodunrin, 2021). In this study an attempt is made to argue that Northern Sotho proverbs, as oral literature, plays a mammoth task in transmitting information among the people during the pandemic. The study discusses how Northern Sotho proverbs as fundamental aspects of oral form can join the speedily digital platforms to transfer information among people during COVID-19. The sole purpose of this paper is to thoroughly examine the philosophical relevance and significance of some Northern Sotho proverbs in the context of COVID-19. An attempt is made here on how people can use their proverbs to reflect on some occurrences related to the pandemic. In a nutshell, the study documents a compilation of Northern Sotho proverbs which are observed and critically studied to be semantically applicable to the pandemic's situation.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Various scholars hold imperative opinions regarding the importance of language withing the communities. Ratau (2021) shows that art plays a mammoth role in the spiritual articulation in the times of COVID-19. In his essay Ratau explores the reading of a Nigerian poet and novelist Ben Okri's poetry in the context of the pandemic. Buthelezi (2022) relevantly conducted a pragma-sociolinguistic study regarding the relevance of isiZulu proverbs in the

context of COVID-19. She found that proverbs still have a place in contemporary African society and thus people should use them in their daily conversations and occurrences. Congruently, the current investigation examines the philosophical significance portrayed by language in the context of COVID-19 with special reference to some Northern Sotho proverbs.

Writing about the significance of proverbs, Seanego (2021, 476) posits that they are the strongest component of a language and that proverbs should give people life. Seanego (*ibid*) further submits that language custodians should not allow proverbs to lose their value in the Fourth Industrial revolution and beyond. Ramohlale, Mogoboya and Chauke (2021) add that proverbs should be relevant in the contemporary society. These opinions are of importance to this study as it endeavours to probe the relevance of Northern Sotho proverbs in the COVID-19 times as well as post the pandemic. Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural perspective postulates that language should serve people's learning ability, thus reflecting the importance of language towards the development of human being. Language as a reliable source of communication carries a mammoth responsibility regarding community safety during and post COVID-19. Through proverbs as an important tool to transform social order (Lee, 2015), the Northern Sotho people can apply their proverbs to create conversations about the pandemic and brings about self-protection thereof. Mphasha and Lebese (2015) supplement the above view by stating that health issues should be tackled in a language that people (patients) understand so thus to improve and protect the lives of millions of people. The current study therefore encourages Northern Sotho communities to apply their relevant proverbs to share information during and post the pandemic.

The coinage of proverbs was philosophically driven. Their figurative yet philosophical meanings play an integral part in improving communities' understanding of life and its stunts. Serudu (1984) opines that a proverb should be interpreted from different perspectives with a view to glean the full meaning. Serudu's view is central to this paper, challenging Northern Sotho communities to apply their proverbs in the context of the pandemic.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

This study is purely qualitative in approach. It has utilised this approach to seek the quality of language (through proverbs) in the times of COVID-19 and beyond. Thus, the importance of language is tested against the global status quo. In terms of sampling, a purposive sampling technique guided this investigation. The proverbs were purposively selected due to their relevancy of the topic under discussion. Document analysis method is used as a data gathering tool. The findings were synthesised and analysed in a thematic lens.

### **4. Presentation and Discussion of the Findings**

The coronavirus pandemic, also known as COVID-19, was first detected in December 2019 in Wuhan, China. Thereafter, we witnessed a spread of the pandemic throughout global countries. As a result, this led to the World Health Organization (WHO), as a responsible organization for world health affairs, to rapidly intervene. Their intervention strategies were shared with global countries. This investigation therefore discusses how language is related to some of the pandemic's occurrences with special reference to Northern Sotho proverbs, an official language spoken in Limpopo, Gauteng and Mpumalanga provinces in South Africa. On this note, Sebola and Abodunrin (2021) agree that the appropriateness of each proverb depends on the context. Therefore, context reveals a true philosophical origin and meaning of a proverb as it is demonstrated in the proceeding analysis.

#### **4.1. Adhering and (not) Adhering to Measures Put In Place**

For the better enhancement of mitigation of the infection and spread of COVID-19, measures put in place should strictly be respected by the global communities. Global leaders in governmental positions and health organizations put more emphasis on the adherence of measures. Measures to mitigate the virus are put in place to protect people from detecting the virus as well as exposing the close ones. However, this should not be seen as the responsibility for merely and only government leaders and health workers. Communities should embrace the efforts and steps taken by these leaders. In Northern Sotho we proverbially advise each other that: "*Monamolomo o boletše, monaletsebe o kwele*" (Lit. The speaker has spoken, the listener has heard). The proverb literally teaches that

everyone in life should play his or her role. The compound noun “*monamolomo*” (the speaker) posits that the one who is tasked to counsel has done their assignment while the proceeding compound noun “*monaletsebe*” (the listener) emphasises that the one who is being advised should be considerate and humbly comply. Culturally in Northern Sotho a leader is respected and thus their voice is always heard. Every instruction coming from a king is followed. That is why they say: “*Koša ya tšwa mošate balata re a e binela*” (Lit. All followers dance for a song coming from a royal house). This proverb teaches the community to be respectful to their leaders’ advice. Northern Sotho communities should not forget this proverb in COVID-19 times and thus observe the instructions from health experts and government leaders.

Respecting both elders’ and leaders’ instructions is regarded a major tradition in Northern Sotho culture. The one who fails to adhere to advice is sulkily told that: “*Popotela ye e sa kwego e wela retheng la mohwelere*” and further that: “*nyatšamolala e hwetše molaleng*”; both proverbs literally meaning that the one who does not listen falls into trouble. Not adhering to COVID-19 mitigating measures shall see individuals being infected and eventually losing precious lives. Hence Rakoma (1978, 165) writes to such persons that: “*Legodi ke a lela, ga ke nyake nama ya kgomo, ke nyaka ya motho*”, loosely meaning that misfortunes and dangers usually direct to people who dislike obeying rules. Drawing from the meaning of this proverb, it can be contented that individuals who are obstinate to adhere to lockdown regulations may be unfortunate to succumb to the pandemic.

#### 4.2. On Social Distancing

Onset, post realizing that COVID-19 is gradually spreading across the globe, countries implemented the social distancing policies. The WHO (2021a, 2) reported that the SARS-CoV-2 can spread from the mouth or nose of an infectious person when the person coughs, sneezes, sings, breathes heavily or talks. For that, a close contact with such person is discouraged. In South Africa people are instructed to stand 2meter away from each other. This is to reduce the risk of exposing one another with the disease which was studied to be communicable through physical interaction. A proverb relevant to the 2meter away rule in Northern Sotho is postulated by Matsepe (1974, 113) when he writes, “*Mahlaku go swa mabatamelane, makatogane ga a swe*” (Lit. Nearby trees both catches fire, the distanced ones do not). The main verb “*go swa*” (to catch fire) in the proverb implies danger while “*trees*” imply people. The key word in the proverb is “*mabatamelane*”, which means things in close contact. This proverb thus lands its hand by helping global governments to caution people to adhere to social distancing policies.

#### 4.3. Quarantining

Quarantine, according to South African Government Gazzete (2020, 4), means the restrictions of activities or separation of a person who was exposed to COVID-19. Such a person is required to isolate himself for a number of 14 days. This was done so to prevent the spread of the disease from other non-exposed persons. Research by WHO (2021a) suggests that persons who self-isolate themselves through quarantining prevent the outbreak and spread of the pandemic at workplaces. The relevant proverb employed for such activity in Northern Sotho is: “*Modulathoko ipoloke, gare go dula dikokotla*” (Lit. An outcast, protect yourself; middle seating is for the giants). The locative “*gare*” implies the public space while the proper noun “*dikokotla*” (giants) implies persons who are non-exposed to the virus, those who are fit enough to walk wherever they wish. This proverb is directly speaking to its people, that those who are exposed to the virus are urged to stay away from public spaces as they may be dangerous by spreading the disease.

#### 4.4. On Deaths during COVID-19

Although Ratau, Monyela and Mofokeng (2021) view death as a mutual fear for all the people, in Northern Sotho it is believed and felt that: “*Lehu la bontšing ga le babe*”. Rakoma (1978, 176) explains this proverb to imply that a danger falling to many people is not as feared as the one falling to single individual. As such, deaths caused by COVID-19 affects most families, if not all. The virus does not choose families. Hence in Northern Sotho we proverbially state that: “*Sebokuboku ga se bone, se bona ka mosela*”, loosely meaning that nature is not able to choose. Although the pain of death is never familiar, the cited two proverbs literally advise and teaches people to accept and spiritually heal from deaths caused by the pandemic as it can affect any family.

Ratau *et al.* (2021) admit that the arrival of Coronavirus has changed many funerary rituals among African communities and thus call for re-imagination of some funerary rituals. In South Africa, in 2020-2021, no more than 50 people were allowed to attend a funeral. The proverb “*Dijo di bitša bagwera, lehu le bitša meloko*”, literally meaning that the most important people during funeral are close family than friends, is thus relevant in this case.

#### 4.5. Towards Finding Preventions and Cures for COVID-19

Since its discovery in December 2019 in China, COVID-19 rapidly hit the world unexpectedly. Global health experts under the guidance of World Health Organization never set foot down in finding the preventions and cures for the disease. Due to the newness of the pandemic in the face of the globe, experts had to recommend vaccines while hoping for the discovery of permanent cures. Vaccines such as Pfizer, Johnson & Johnson, Moderna and Novavax are recommended. Proverbially, in Northern Sotho we say: “*Thibela bolwetši e phala kalafo*”, a famous proverbial language in English which goes: “prevention is better than cure”.

Finding the prevention or permanent cure for a disease which is new to the world cannot be an easy task. However, in Northern Sotho we are able to give our global health experts hope, telling them that: “*Kodumela moepathuse, ga go lehumo le le tšwago kgauswi.*” (Sweat the gold digger, for no wealth shall come easily). Furthermore, we know that: “*Molematšhemo ya lekgwara o ngatela tsiba sa kgokong*” (The plougher of hard farm ties *kgokong*'s cloth). The two proverbs encourage one to work harder. The sweats coming from a person represent work at hard and a reward is expected. These proverbs encourage our global health practitioners to work tirelessly in finding a permanent cure for COVID-19. In summing this section up, it is vital to encourage patience among scientists who are tasked to seek cures for the virus. Proverbially Northern Sotho speakers say: “*Tšhiwana e sa hwego e leta monono*” (An undying orphan awaits wealthy). Factually this proverb advises people to remain patient in the difficulties they encounter in lives; including health workers who face stigma and discrimination because of their proximity to potentially infected people (WHO, 2021b, 8).

#### 4.6. Uniting Against the Pandemic

Through both the United Nations (UN) and World Health Organization (WHO), global countries united with an attempt to combat the spread of COVID-19. As this is not a one-nation pandemic, it therefore requires the global nations to take a united route and the sharing of ideas by various health experts. Health knowledge acquired from all corners of the world is much needed during this time of global crisis. Observing the efforts put forward by global nations, a Northern Sotho speaker knows that: “*Tau tša hloka seboka di šywa le ke nare e hlotša*” (Ununited lions do not catch even a limping buffalo). This proverb encourages unity amongst the people. It advises people to work together to achieve a particular purpose. The concord “*tša*” in the above proverb tells that it is not a single lion but a group of them chasing a single buffalo. Due to disputes and quarrels among themselves, these lions fail to catch the poor limping buffalo. The struggling buffalo survives death due to lack of unity among its prey, lions. This is so similarly to what Northern Sotho people are taught, that: “*Mphiri o tee ga o lle*” (Lit. A single cooper does not make sound). A single copper will need other cooper(s) to start making melodious sounds. The proverb literally advises that working alone to achieve a certain purpose is not condoned. A man needs his fellow men to make life liveable. The two cited proverbs share the same sentiments with what global nations are doing regarding the fight against COVID-19, working together to improve the health status quo.

### CONCLUSION

When COVID-19 was initially reported in December 2019, people never thought it would rapidly spread throughout the world, little we forgot a Northern Sotho proverb which goes: “*Ditlabonnyane ke ditlaboima*”, loosely meaning small happenings which are normally taken for granted end up with big moments and severe consequences thereof. The essay discussed the philosophical relevancy of some Northern Sotho proverbs which are deemed meaningful in the context of COVID-19. It is important for people to take care of themselves in order to protect themselves against the pandemic. In this investigation, language is argued to bring a philosophical significance during the pandemic, proverbs as a point in case of the discussion. Mphasha (2015) observes that proverbs are used in different situations to match the particular needs and thus they should be understood in their

context. Proverbs relating to the regulations of global lockdown and lastly ones relating to the fight against the pandemic were analysed. Even so, communities still carry full responsibility of adhering to the global measures put to the fourth as a way of combating the disease.

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