

Poetry as a Strategy in Courting: The Case of Basotho Boys

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to examine the oral Sesotho poem that was used by Basotho boys as a courting strategy. In most African societies, including Sesotho society, boys used to adopt several approaches to propose love to girls. They would perform heroic actions to attract girls, engage in traditional songs and dances in which they would choose potential partners, or recite poems to the girls to express their feelings. While the former were performed in public, there would not be any audience for the latter. In Sesotho, there was one communal poem that was used by boys to propose love. Using textual analysis, the article sets out to explore this popular Sesotho poem by an anonymous poet to understand the language used in it and to interpret the meaning expressed with the chosen diction. The findings reveal the uniqueness and richness of language attained through the use of metaphors in which the poet uses concrete objects to express his abstract feelings. He identifies himself with the four important objects in the daily lives of the Basotho. Through the use of metaphor, the speaker portrays his character as well as the persona of the wife he anticipates as a suitable life partner.

Keywords: Basotho boys; courting; oral poetry; metaphor; textual analysis; character portrayal

Introduction

In the history of the Basotho, a boy's initiation of a relationship usually translated into a marriage. To facilitate the process, various strategies were adopted to charm and date a partner. To understand the context of this study, one needs to distinguish the two terms courtship and dating. Manning and Smock (2005) relate that dating is a form of courting. However, some scholars indicate that the two terms can be used interchangeably since they both involve activities performed by the couple to assess the possibility of taking their relationship to a higher level over time or are considered an initial stage to marriage (Levesque and Caron 2004). African society is a reflection of this as courting is interpreted as a ritual that initiates the ultimate goal of marriage; as a result, it is considered momentous and thus more than trite romance (Menchaca-Bagnulo 2019). While dating is also considered a ritual that may result in marriage, its degree of certainty is less compared to courtship. Baxter and Bullis (1986) and King and Christensen (1983) further assert that dating involves various actions which are repeated over and over with certain symbolic meanings. Symbolic activities may be in the form of words, objects, and/or gestures. It is these symbolic activities that become an abstract representation of love as supported by Sandstrom, Martin, and Fine (2006). In the current article, the two terms will be used interchangeably as they share a common goal and involve a series of actions directed towards the achievement of an intended goal.

In a series of activities meant to lure a potential life partner into a relationship, from an African perception, a man brings gifts to his intended bride (EraGem 2018), and the Basotho are not exceptional in this regard. The gifts may be in the form of bead necklaces or clothing. His courtship extends to gifts of beer for the whole family to enjoy. He might also render his services to the family such as helping to work in the fields or helping with household chores. With these gifts, the boy demonstrates that he can be a good provider for his family. Usually, the reception that the visitor receives is indicative of whether his proposal of love will be accepted or not. For instance, if a girl or her parents are impressed with the boy, they would give him a token on his return to show to his parents.

Similarly, in Sesotho culture, if a girl is attracted to a boy, she would visit the boy's family voluntarily to perform some household chores such as sweeping the compound, fetching water, washing clothes, and gathering wood. It is noteworthy that all these would be done very early in the morning because, in Sesotho culture, the girl who is of "wife-material" or a real woman performs all family chores at dawn when the rest of the family is still asleep. In this way, family members would wake to freshly cooked meals in a calm and clean home. The expectation is that the boy's family would be impressed too and respond to these advances.

This practice resulted in marriages within the same territory since none of the parties used to search far for a future partner. The evidence of this practice is still experienced even now. Thus, a girl who is married nearer to her home is highly valued for her good

behaviour that presumably attracted her in-laws. If a girl is married far from her home, people would indirectly cast doubts about the behaviour of such a girl by asking questions such as, “Were there no boys in your village to marry you?” “Why were you not married amongst people who knew you?” “Do you mean nobody wanted you for a daughter-in-law?” The practices further serve as a solid foundation for new marriages. As Scott et al. (2013) assert, divorce was rarely heard of in African marriages because of these pre-marriage activities played by the two families. First, they argue that the activities were meant to guide a girl into being a good wife. Second, they reveal that such activities establish strong bonds between the involved families. As a result, the foundational relationship would enable the families to solve problems together if the young couple experiences any in their marriage.

The pre-marriage activities practised in the African culture demonstrate the value of communication in courtship, one of the reasons for divorce as attested by Scott et al. (2013). Achebe (2019) claims that Africans can communicate and experience amorous love for one another. The activities, therefore, reveal that communication is an important aspect of everyday life without which it would be difficult for the sender or receiver to make sense of the world around them. As Adler, Rosenfeld, and Proctor (2010) submit, in the communication process, the sender encodes a message and transmits it through an appropriate channel to the receiver who decodes the message and provides feedback. It should be noted that both context and shared knowledge are significant in the process, as Kolobe and Thetso (2019) attest by stating that in most situations of language use, the quality and effect of the communication rely on the contextual knowledge shared by the participants.

Besides the activities discussed above, a Mosotho boy would recite a poem to lure a girl he considers a potential future partner. While most of the activities involve the family or community members, the poem was recited for a girl away from the observers. Reciting a poem was used as one of the strategies by which a boy could verbally declare and initiate a relationship with a girl. Most of the time, the girl was expected to respond favourably to such a move as the strategy was communal to the Basotho. The purpose of the chosen channel of courting used by Basotho boys, which is oral poetry, is both shared and known by Basotho girls, hence they were able to respond to the boy’s initiative of declaring his love in such a manner. As Adler, Rosenfeld, and Proctor (2010) explain, it is necessary for both the boy as the initiator of the message and the girl who is the recipient to understand and share the common linguistic and cultural norms for effective communication. It is worth noting, however, that although the poem is not recited in public, if a girl is attracted to a proposing boy, she would display her feelings indirectly by visiting the boy’s family and performing the duties mentioned earlier. The current study seeks to explore the Sesotho courting poem to analyse the language aspects and techniques adopted in it.

The Nature of the Poem

This is an “I am” poem, that is, a poem recited by a person about himself. It expresses the way someone feels, hopes, and thinks. This type of poem begins in the same way as poems that begin with “I wonder” or “I feel,” therefore, it is found to be one type of personal poem (Betts n.d.). “I am” poems are not titled, as is the case with the one which the current study explores. The poem is oral by nature because it is transmitted by word of mouth to the descendant generations, and hence it is the earliest form of poetry. It is a common feature of oral poetry not to have a title; as Kgobe (1994) indicates, titles are a convention of written poetry rather than oral poetry. Another distinct feature of oral poetry that we also find in this case study is that it does not have a composer. One could even relate the use of oral poetry to the literacy level of Basotho because most of them did not have formal education. At the same time, the use of oral poetry to express their emotions allowed each individual to own the message or intent of the moment; as Kgobe (1994) states, oral poetry allows for a free shift in reference. In an “I am” poem, one talks about oneself through the use of imagery. It is full of descriptive personal traits, a feature borne by the poem used in the current study. It can be argued, therefore, that the poem is a praise poem as it describes not only the character traits but also the physical attributes of the reciter (Mtumane 2003).

Review of Related Literature

In this section, we review the literature that is related to the current study. Several studies have been conducted covering different aspects of poetry. They include Moleleki’s study (1988) on the analysis of Maphalla’s works, Ebede’s work (2017) on techniques in African poetry, and Maimane and Mathonsi’s study (2021) on intertextuality.

In his study titled “Some Aspects of Imagery in Maphalla’s Poetry,” Moleleki (1988) analyses some extracts from Maphalla’s poetic works, in particular examining three aspects, namely, influence, imagery, and protest. Moleleki uses different types of imagery to interpret and understand Maphalla’s view of the world. He explores imagery not only concerning vision but also as a communicative device, and this has shed more light on the current study since it employs imagery to interpret the message conveyed in the oral Sesotho poem that was used as a strategy in courting by Basotho boys. In his words, Moleleki expounds that images are mental impressions that symbolise in various ways the things and qualities of the external world in which we live (1988, 80). In the same light, this study highlights the application of imagery to reflect the emotions and intentions felt by the Basotho boys in courting girls.

The current study also drew from the works of Ebede (2017). Ebede conducted a study on the “Discourse Techniques in African Poetry” (2017) in which he investigated the use of language, proverbs, code-mixing and code-switching, and the names as techniques employed to interpret and understand the messages in two selected African poems. Of the listed techniques discussed, language use in poetry is claimed to be of

paramount importance as it facilitates the understanding of the theme in any work of art. In discussing the significance of language as a tool for transmitting the message, as also alluded in the current study, Ebede's study examines the meaning of the associations of words used in African poetry while the present study highlights the impact of language in the courting poem and its contribution to the comprehension of the central idea expressed by the poet.

Moreover, Maimane and Mathonsi (2021) investigated the intertextual relationship between *lithoko* (poems) and modern Sesotho poetry. They observed that Sesotho poetry has, since its emergence, been a host for other literary genres with its content reflecting *lithoko*. Although their study explores the phenomenon of intertextuality, it also defines the aspect of content or subject matter to demarcate between modern Sesotho poetry and *lithoko*. The latter informs the current study as it aims to examine the subject matter or the message comprised in the courting poem, while the former facilitates the understanding of the nature of the poem under study.

The reviewed literature does not analyse poems, as the current study does. However, it discusses several aspects of poetry that inform the understanding and analysis of poems, and this relates it to the current study. The techniques and aspects have been discussed in the context of written poems, but they can be applied to the oral poem as well. Our observation is that there has been a shift from oral to written types of texts and most oral texts have been written to preserve them from being lost or forgotten. In the next section, we present the theory that underpins the study.

Conceptual Framework

This article applies textual analysis as both a method of processing and interpreting data. Textual analysis, according to Hawkins (2018), comprises understanding language and symbols in a text to gain more information on how people make sense of life. This method is qualitative, interpretive and allows the use of other methods to explore the unit under investigation. It can be applied to different types of written or spoken texts (Hawkins 2018; Luo 2019); it is applied in this paper to analyse an oral poem. Textual analysis examines, among others, the content and meaning of a text as well as the relationship between the text and the cultural context in which it was produced. It also allows researchers to make inferences about the producer and the audience through the analysis of meaning and semantic relationships of words and concepts (Luo 2019). In the present study, the language used in the poem is interpreted in cognisance with the particular choice of words and the culture of the Basotho. The analysis from this perspective, therefore, combines the researchers' linguistic competence and knowledge of the social structures that have influenced the message in the courting poem in compliance with Hawkins's (2018) view. That is, the researchers conducted the textual analysis to understand the meaning of the poem and to interpret the message as captured in the chosen diction.

Data Presentation

As has been stated, this article explores an oral poem that Basotho boys used to recite to express their love to girls. The poem is presented below with the translation by Mabile and Dieterlen (2000).

Poem

Ke lekopokopo; ke'a koposela (I am a tin case; I wobble)

Ke metsi a foro; ke'a lelemela (I am furrow water; I flow straight)

Ke lepolanka; ke khaoha likoto (I am timber; I break into pieces)

Ke mabele; ke'a qhalana, ke hloka mothonaki (I am sorghum; I scatter, I need a collector).

Another translated version of the poem was obtained from Bereng (1982, 37) and reads as follows:

I am a tingling tin, I sound;

I am the waters that flow without direction, become a furrow, therefore.

I am the grains of sorghum that have fallen on the ground; I need [sic] someone to pick me from the ground.

The researchers in this study feel that these different translations have not significantly impacted the message conveyed in the poem; therefore, they adopt the translation by Mabile and Dieterlen (2000). The noticeable difference is considered a result of regional variations stemming from the oral nature of the poem. Since language is not homogenous in all contexts, someone can recite the poem differently, as noted in the second stanza of the poem.

Analysis of the Poem

Poetry is a type of text that features expressions of feelings and ideas with special diction. Ngcanga (1987) adds that the language used in poems differs from normal language in that it features metaphors or similes. He further indicates that metaphors can express or say much in a few words. We, therefore, adopt textual analysis to interpret the message comprised in the poem with a focus on the use of metaphors. The words used in a poem, as Bereng (1982) asserts, may sound meaningless, but a story can be construed from them. For instance, one would not make sense of the meanings of “*lekopokopo*,” “*metsi a foro*,” “*lepolanka*,” and “*mabele*” in the context of the love proposal. However, the words have meanings beyond just their definitions encapsulated in their metaphoric use and their special arrangement. Looking at the courting poem presented above, not only the mentioned nouns are fundamental but also the verbs that

succeed them are equally significant in the interpretation of the meaning. Below, we unpack this one-stanza poem by interpreting the meanings of words used in each line to understand the intended message.

Looking at the first line, “*Ke Lekopokopo kea Kuposela*” (I am a tin case; I wobble), the speaker compares himself to a vessel that wobbles as the proverb goes, “an empty vessel makes louder noise.” One would want to understand why a person would identify himself as a tin case. The implication here is that, like an empty vessel, the poet feels empty inside and he yearns to be filled with love so that he can stop the wobbly sound. The understanding, therefore, is that if he is filled with love, he will be content and stop the irritating noise similar to that made by an empty vessel. He will also be steady and firm in his love just like a filled vessel. He will not be swept away by the wind because he will be full and therefore could stand the waves of wind.

The interpretation of “*kea kuposela*” can be extended further to mean once this vessel is filled, it becomes united with the grain inside it; consequently, one’s attempt or desire to get the contents inside the vessel means s/he will have to take the vessel as well since it carries the grains. In a way, the vessel protects the contents inside it (personal communication). Similarly, anything that can be put inside the tin, since it is not only grain, would be saved from scattering, spilling or leaking. This, then, is mutual in that the tin needs to be filled to stop the wobbling and to safeguard it against hazards like winds, while the contents of the tin would also enjoy its protection from scattering or spilling. In a love relationship, this means that once a girl accepts a proposal from a boy, the boy feels that he owns the girl and feels responsible for her welfare. As has been observed, “love is always subject to frustration and rejection, and commonly bound together with such dangerous emotions as jealousy, hate, and fear” (Casterton 1998, 125). That is why he can even fight other boys who would make advances towards the girl he desires. We have also noticed the figurative application in the verb “*kuposela*.” This verb rhymes with the noun “*lekopokopo*.” The effect of rhyming is to create music to the ear of the wooer; as Casterton (1998) asserts, poetry is the kind of writing that is nearest to music, and nearest to dance. As Ngcangca (1987) describes it, a poem is compared to a song that bursts from the heart of the composer.

In line 2, “*Ke metsi a foro kea Lelemela*” (I am furrow water; I flow straight), the speaker compares himself to water from a furrow. What he is communicating here is that he is a straightforward person. That is, he flows in one direction just like the water in a furrow. His love is for this one person and her alone. It also extends to mean that he is willing to abide if directed elsewhere. In a relationship, the speaker expresses that he is a trustworthy and faithful person who takes only one direction, thus, one love for one person. This expression displays the trustworthiness the boy promises the girl. The verb “*lelemela*” also denotes the swift, easy, silent movement made by this water. The boy expresses his soft and trustworthy character that would be an attractive personality for a husband. In his proposal, the boy promises to be in love with only the proposed girl, although Sesotho culture supports polygamy. Many proverbs present men as worthy of

marrying and loving more than one wife. Basotho men know that women do not want to share their husbands, hence the use of the expression “*metsi a foro*” to convince the girl that if accepted he will love only her, unlike what other Basotho men do.

In line 3, “*Ke lepolanka ke khaoha likoto*” (I am a plank, I break into pieces), the speaker refers to himself as timber. Timber is a strong piece of wood that has undergone some processing and is used for construction. However, the speaker surrenders his firmness to be cut into pieces. In most African societies, men are considered strong, hence pillars of their families, as depicted in proverbs such as *monna ke nku haa lle* (a man is a sheep thus does not cry). However, in this poem, the man expresses his strong feeling of love. He admits that the impact of his love for the girl softens him. He becomes weak and therefore breakable, hence the use of “*ke khaoha likoto*” (I break into pieces). Some would look at this as cowardice because society expects men to be strong, but the boy in this poem is tamed by the love he has for the girl.

Another alternative explanation of this line is that, unlike unprocessed wood, this plank has been processed and comes out smart and ready to use, but needs tender care in that it breaks easily. In this way, since the boys marry after initiation, the process they undergo to be instigated into manhood, the message is that they have left behind boyish behaviour and are ready to be men (Bereng 1982). But still, they need someone who is caring and would make good use of them as husbands. This means that this comparison is meant to persuade the girl to see how susceptible and desperate the boy is and how submissive she should be as a future wife.

The speaker further compares himself to “*mabele*” (sorghum), as line 4, “*Ke mabele kea qhalana- ke hloka mothonaki*” (I am sorghum; I scatter; I need a collector), illustrates. Sorghum is a significant grain in Basotho culture. Besides its use in making *hwala* (beer), *motoho*, *leshelehele*, *papa*, and *dikhobe*, *mabele* can be used for medicinal purposes. It can be used as a treatment for sexually transmitted diseases, pellagra, HIV/AIDS, and assists in increasing fertility in infertile women (Mashinini and Mokhothu 2009). Based on its usefulness, one would not want sorghum to scatter because that would be a great loss. In a relationship, the boy compares himself to this important grain because he feels he is also important and useful in this particular girl’s life. As a man, he proposes to be a provider, a defender, and a caretaker to the future wife, their families and the community at large, and their entire future family as the Sesotho culture dictates. He promises to play all the possible roles for the welfare of both the wife and children if his proposal is accepted.

Having compared himself with sorghum that scatters, the boy continues to make a clear appeal that he needs a collector: “*ke hloka mothonaki*.” The implication here is that, if collected, the reciter can become as useful in all spheres of life as sorghum is. The use of the word “*hloka*” (need) in the appeal attracts the attention of the listener. Basotho men are notorious for being authoritative and pompous. For this particular one to use the word “*hloka*” (need), one could read desperation and humility. That is to say, he

suggests “as respected as I am by my sex, I humble myself to you because I need this fulfillment of love.” As such, *mabele* can be viewed as symbolic of men’s character as weak as they cannot shape their lives on their own—they need a partner, *mothonaki*, to shape them. The task of collecting scattered *mabele* is indicative of the expected character or personality traits of the wooed girl and wife-to-be, namely patience, carefulness, concentration, good health, and strategic thinking. Considering that one should kneel to collect scattered grains, this line suggests patience and submissiveness. However, failure to gather sorghum would lead to hunger and poverty, which any Mosotho woman would not want to experience.

Discussion

The analysis demonstrated figurative aspects of the language used in the poem. The most observed figure of speech is imagery. Fogle (1962) explains imagery according to its creative power, the connotative richness of its content, and the harmonious unity and fusion of its elements. In this poem, imagery is achieved through the use of metaphor. Landau (2018) refers to metaphor as a tool that is used to understand abstractness in terms of superficially dissimilar but more relatively concrete concepts. This portrays the element of comparison, an imaginative fusion of two objects, which then requires knowledge of the context, background information and cultural factors. Since the proposer expresses his feeling, the central aspect of the poem, as Bereng (1982) indicates, is “I.” The persona identifies himself directly in relation to the four discussed objects in the poem and couples the imagery with the copulative prefix *ke* (I) to identify one object with another (Ntuli 1984). In Sesotho, *ke* is a copula under the identifying copulative. It is differentiated from the invariable copula *ke* whose form is not affected by the change of noun class subject (Mojapelo 2019). While the latter is high toned and refers to the third person, the former relates to the first-person singular pronoun *'na* (myself) and thus bears a low tone, as is shown with the diacritic mark below:

ǀKe lekopokopo... (I am a tin case...)

ǀKe metsi a foro... (I am furrow water...)

ǀKe lepolanka... (I am a plank...)

ǀKe mabele... (I am sorghum...)

The four objects used to build the metaphors are all significant to human life. People boil water on the fire from wood (timber) to make porridge from sorghum. This porridge is a very healthy meal in Basotho culture. This, therefore, is symbolic of the relationship between the text being analysed and the cultural context, as suggested in the content analysis theory adopted in this study.

While a girl is not obliged to accept the proposal made by the boy, she is lured into doing so. The metaphors used, the melody of the diction, and the rhyme stay in her

memory and make her feel special. In this way, a boy has the advantage of keeping the attention of the girl for a longer period. The shared knowledge of their cultural background is equally significant in the transmission, interpretation, and perception of the message and its purpose. To understand the meaning of the words used, the girl is indirectly involved in thinking about the boy; the vision of the boy stays on her mind longer than if the message was passed on in the direct three words “I love you.” In Basotho culture, love turns out to be a song with a clear ultimate goal of marriage. Presented as poetic as this, the proposal is mostly accepted, resulting in the union of the two by marriage.

Conclusion

The article has analysed a popular poem that was used by Basotho boys to lure a girl into a love relationship. It has explored the use of figurative language and has also interpreted the message comprised in the chosen diction. The study explored the imagery in this four-line poem, which was attained through the use of metaphor. The composer/poet identifies himself with the four important objects in the lives of the Basotho, namely *lekopokopo*, *metsi*, *lepolanka*, and *mabele*. With the choice of this diction, a Mosotho boy employs concrete objects to express his abstract feelings for a girl. The diction serves not only to express his feelings but also to portray who he is and what he is capable of as a man. The metaphors are further engaged to stipulate the anticipated characteristics of a partner he wants.

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