

Theological ethics expressed through Setswana proverbs: Another way of decolonising theology



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The intention of this article is to demonstrate that theological ethics as a discipline can be expressed through some Setswana proverbs and idioms, which is another way of decolonising theology in Africa. Decolonising theology through African proverbs in expressing ethics is another way of decolonising theology since the philosophical elucidations and the meaning embedded in proverbs does not easily change over time. Proverbs are important in the substantiation of philosophical claims, and therefore are a powerful tool for education and moral formation in all sectors of society. The method used in this research is a literature study, as the main tool to gather the information of these proverbs and how they are educatively used in ethical and moral decision-making. The objective of this article is not just to define the proverbs but to point out that African folklore is rich with moral and ethical instructions. Methodologically, various proverbs are quoted to indicate that individuals are responsible for self-development when it comes to ethical and moral formation. The same sentiment prevails that an individual is a member of the community, and that as an individual he or she achieves higher goals of life not in isolation but through the contribution of the community. Application of these Setswana proverbs is didactic when considering an individual's development and achievement, the importance of community involvement, and the complementarity where an individual cannot live in isolation. The conclusion is made that there is still some hope that although ethics and morality are dwindling in African cultural fabrics, African preachers should embark on popularisation of proverbs, promote school curricula that include proverbs, and articulate theological ethics through proverbs.

Contribution: This is an interdisciplinary study engaging disciplines such as linguistics, history, ethics, theology, anthropology, sociology, and communications. This study shows the richness of Setswana proverbs in articulating theological ethics. It shows that proverbs in African languages can be used to unwrap theology from western clutches and make it relevant to the African context. It makes a remarkable contribution towards a theological decolonial project.

Keywords: Setswana; African; proverbs; ethics; morals; community; theology; decolonisation.

Introduction

This article is intended to be a tool for theologians and ethicists to engage indigenous knowledge towards the decolonising of theology in Africa. It is an analytical study of proverbial expressions that speak directly into theological ethics. After some broad African understanding and definition of proverbs, I intend to delve into epistemological understanding of theological ethics as expressed through some Setswana proverbs. The rationale behind the exercise of decolonising theology through African proverbs is that Africa is slowly losing her sense of identity. To unmask theology or education of the colonial supremacist ideology, acculturation and basic education in the native language should be ideally non-negotiable. I fully subscribe to Sibani's (2018) assertion that:

There is a need for Africans to teach and educate their children in the midst of acculturation so that the local language of the people will not be completely lost to Western languages. Government should see to it that the medium of instruction in the primary school is initially the mother tongue or language of immediate community and at a later stage, English language. (p. 67)

Now is the time to heed the need to identify the universal values in African proverbs in theology's decolonising processes. 'The best form of theologising might be collecting, creating, and reflecting on proverbs' (Bevans 1992:12). There are two ethical areas that will be examined. These are personal ethics, and communal lifestyle which encompasses sharing. These areas will be defined, expressed, and supported through some Setswana proverbs.

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Definitions

Languages of the world are rich with proverbial and idiomatic expressions. The substance and the beauty of any language is found in these expressions. The Nigerian theologian Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu (2015a) shows how Africans value proverbs, as well as their usage in their speech or communication. For instance, he quips that the Igbo of Nigeria refer to proverbs as 'vegetables for eating speech', and as 'a palm oil with which words are eaten'. The Igbo further cite that 'a child who knows how to use proverbs has justified the dowry paid on his mother's head'. The Yoruba refer to proverbs as 'horses for chasing missing words. For the Zulu, 'without proverbs, language would be but a skeleton without flesh, a body without a soul'. This is also expressed by Ozumba (2004), that:

African languages are very rich in terms of their linguistic malleability, profundity, and resourcefulness. That a man who knows his language well has a great advantage and his words are more likely to be regarded as expressing the truth than those who do not have the mastery of their language. (n.p.)

African beauty is reflected in her language eloquence and proverbs: *Monate wa Setswana o utlwala mo puong* [The beauty of Setswana is in its language]. *Puo* [language] is defined not just by its orality but also by its linguistic articulations. Some African scholars attempt to give the concise definitions of proverbs. For instance, Kanu (2015b) defines proverbs as follows:

African proverbs are the wisdom and experience of the African people, usually of several ages gathered and summed up in one expression. They spring from the people and represent the voice of the people and express the interpretation of their belief, principles of life and conduct. It expresses the moral attitudes of a given culture, and reflects the hopes, achievements and failings of a people. (p. 20)

Etta and Mogu (2012) assert that a proverb is:

[A] phrase, saying, sentence, statement or expression of the folk which contains above all wisdom, truth, morals, experience, lessons and advice concerning life and which has been handed down from generation to generation. (p. 188)

Hence, proverbs permeate relationships, conversations, observations, and experiences; it is also asserted by Kanu (2015a) that:

The centrality of proverbs in African oral tradition is manifested in the frequency of its use by Africans in conversations, speeches, instructions, judgement, drama, arguments, storytelling, in fun making, etcetera. (p. 223)

Etta and Mogu (2012) summarily state that:

[P]roverbs as a short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals and traditional views in a metaphysical, fixed and memorisable form and which is handed down from generation to generation. (p. 188)

Personal morals and ethics

Etta and Mogu (2012) allege that proverbs are important in articulation of ethics and morals:

[B]ecause of the lucidity, luster and credence they add to philosophical claims. Proverbs carry deep-rooted meanings, and

they signify values, principles, morals and ethics for peaceful coexistence. The philosophical elucidations and the meaning embedded in proverbs does not easily change over time. Hence, proverbs are of paramount importance in the substantiation of philosophical claims. (p. 186)

Proverbs are a powerful tool for education and moral formation in all sectors of society. Their directness using symbolism captivates the minds and arouses interest. Uduigwomen (2002:132) summarises that proverbs are a means for formal education and transmission of cultural traditions as well as instruments of education and socialisation. They give an indication of the moral ideas underlying native attitudes (Etta & Mogu 2012:188). Proverbs are the spontaneous instructions in wisdom and moral living. They are the universal truth that transforms the way Africans perceive the world and how they react to events (Kinoti in Gitui 1998:57).

In their didactic capacity, the Setswana proverbs capture ethics and morality mainly as a personal responsibility. The *imago Dei* that humans carry gives them some responsibility, not only to God, but to the community which is the source of one's self-assertiveness. To be morally responsible before God and others discharges humans to live as they like. For 'there are some patterns of life that are appropriate for the nature and purpose of man' (Cook 1990:51). Moral and ethical capacities and conscience are embedded within human nature (Rm 1-3). The Batswana people in their oral tradition note that this inner voice coming out of human nature should be heeded, and as individual beings one should take some serious and conscious heed to listen and take initiatives to comply. In their quest to align with this is the proverb *More mogolo go betlwa wa taola, was motho o a ipetla*, literally meaning 'the greatest medicine is carved through the divining bones, while that of a human is self-carving'. The basic meaning is that *a person chooses their own path in life*. A human takes the responsibility towards becoming what they want to become. It is a self-initiative for one to pattern their lifestyle for now and for future, since *more mogolo* is the divining bone of the highest quality of a traditional doctor. Regardless of its highest quality, its quality cannot surpass that of a human being who subjects himself under the rhetorics of self-discipline and self-initiative. This agrees with Kinoti (in Gitui 1998:72), that proverbs are handed down from generation to generation to teach morality, because humans must be responsible and make moral choices.

This shows the importance of the individual, because *more mogolo go betlwa wa taola, wa motho o a ipetla* expresses the idea that while man can create masterpieces, individual responsibly is a master of his destiny. Put in other words, the size of the pot is determined by the size of the person who carries it. An individual is responsible for shaping themselves into what they want to become. In agreement with Bujo (2016:6), 'African ethics attaches great importance to intentionality in the ethical conduct of the individual'. In another place, Bujo (1990) emphasises that in African ethics,

the heart of everyone is an important locus of ethical conduct and of the integration of ethical norms.

The success or the result of responsibility is measured or determined by one's abilities, efforts, determination, and qualities. For a person to possess a brighter future, one needs personal qualities, skills and capabilities that will propel them towards success. These characteristics contain capacities to determine the level of success one can achieve in life. This proverb encourages an individual to develop skills and hard work contributing towards personal growth that will lead to the achievement of goals and aspirations. Resane (2023) captures this proverb, stating that:

A person chooses his or her own path in life. This proverb is powerful advice for the ethics of self-responsibility. It reveals how individuals must make a choice for what they want to become. It calls for one to make a self-informed decision about one's life. (p. 3)

The proverb is a reminder that personal qualities and efforts are significant in determining one's success and accomplishments. This proverb expresses the morals and ethics of responsibility; and that one should take that responsibility towards fashioning oneself for a better outcome, such as good morals, a brighter future, and a fulfilling life.

The other Setswana proverb that educates about morals and ethics says *Tshwenyana e bowa bontlha e a ikilela* [A young baboon with a sharp fur, evades danger; or, a young baboon with a sharp instinct always avoids danger], popularly known as *people living in a glass house should never throw stones*. A person should know his weaknesses or inabilities and opt for survival mechanisms. Although the proverb basically encourages one to avoid gossips and quarrels, it can still refer to self-defense based on knowing places or circumstances that can make one vulnerable. A person who knows the places or circumstances that victimise them will always develop mechanisms of self-defence or survival. The ethical lesson in this proverb is that an individual should know his or her moral failures and take initiatives of avoiding any opportunity that may victimise them. This is in temptations and addictions. The proverb concurs with another one that says *Setlhare sa mosi ke go o katoga* [The medicine of smoke is to move away from the fire]. Avoid dangers by moving away from any circumstances that may expose one to danger. Harry Truman coined a popular English proverb that says, 'if you cannot stand the heat get out of the kitchen' (Wiersbe 1992:158). The victim of any form of addiction should always avoid situations of falling into temptations to fall back to addiction. This calls for self-discipline. This is expressed by Bujo (1998:28) that 'the individual is also accountable for the undone deed that remains hidden in the heart'.

Another Setswana proverb about a baboon says *tshwene ga e ipone Makopo* [the baboon cannot see its own forehead], meaning the critics normally do not see their own flaws. In

some Setswana dialects, *makopo* is called *mariba* (plural) or *seriba* (singular). This proverb's analytical meaning ties well with Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Mt 7:1-5) where He exhorts His followers not to judge each other by looking at the speck of the sawdust in each other's eye, while paying no attention to the plank in one's own eye. Barnes (1977:76) enlightens us indicating that this speck versus plank was a 'proverb in frequent use among the Jews, and the same sentiment was common among the Greeks, and deserves to be expressed in every language'. Robertson (1930:60) highlights the same sentiment, namely that 'probably a current proverb quoted by Jesus like our people in glass houses throwing stones.' Therefore, it is not in line with African *botho* to be more quick and acute to judge others because of small offences, while we ourselves have larger offences. Barnes (1977) explains:

Even a very small object in the eye of another we discern much more quickly than a much larger one in our own; a small fault in our neighbour we see much more readily than a large one in ourselves. (p. 76)

However, Jesus does not leave us hanging on this proverbial wisdom without offering an ethical alternative (Mt 7:5). He directs us to the proper procedures on interrelationships and self-correction. By first attending to or dealing with a speck in someone's eye, we need to deal with our own log or plank (*faults*) or [*makopo*] in our own eye. This eliminates hypocrisy and ushers in moral ethics of integrity, transparency, and honesty. African ethical perception goes beyond truth telling, but 'may also mean owning up to one's mistakes' (Tinkasiimire in Magesa 2010:59). Our own shortcomings will not be considered as a stumbling block to assist others who are in trouble and need our honest intervention. *Makopo* or *mariba* obscure our sight, and once removed, we shall see clearly and start to discern the small object that obscures the sight of our neighbour. Barnes (1977) puts it succinctly:

The sentiment is, that the readiest way to judge of the imperfections of others is to be free from greater ones ourselves. This qualifies us for judging, makes us candid and consistent, and enables us to see things as they are, and to make proper allowances for frailty and imperfection. (p. 76)

Pentecost (1980:170) expresses the same sentiment that we should be seriously aware that 'the man behind that timber cannot see; he cannot determine the true nature of things', so he must take decisive action to first do self-examination [*go ipona makopo*] before criticising others. Robertson (1930:60) summarises it well, that: 'Get the log out of your eye and you will see clearly how to help the brother get the splinter out [*ekbalein*] of his eye.' Only the righteous God can pass fair judgement; humans are prone to bias and prejudice. 'We have a fatal tendency to exaggerate the faults of others and minimise the gravity of our own' (Stott 1978:178). Humans are unable to see their own flaws, therefore cannot pass judgement fairly, so this proverb encourages human withdrawal from passing judgement, as our *makopo* can be bigger than the specks in others' eyes or lives.

However, [*tshwene go sa iponeng makopo*] [baboon not seeing its own forehead] does not exonerate Christians (Stott 1978):

[T]o suspend their critical faculties in relation to other people, to turn a blind eye to their faults [*pretending not to see them*], to eschew all criticism and to refuse to discern between truth and error, goodness and evil. (p. 175)

Rather prioritise correcting ourselves, before correcting others. Ethics compels Christians to continue as critics by using the power of discernment, but not in a sense of being censorious. 'The censorious critic is a faultfinder, who is negative and destructive towards other people and enjoys actively seeking out their failings' (Stott 1978:176).

Let's discuss moral ethics in relation to a community: African societies live together in community groups, and in these communities, togetherness through communication inculcates some sense of cohesion and interdependence. In this communal lifestyle there is a need for cordial relations needed for stability, tranquillity, and orderliness. There may as well be educational or a form of intellectual recreation, since Africa's ethic has anthropocentric vision, where 'humankind itself is naturally the center of concern, although God is always present, at least implicitly' (Bujo 1992:32). That is why proverbs are understood as popular sayings among the people. They are meant to be communal endeavours to advise, teach or warn. In the hands of shrewd users, proverbs become the immensely powerful weapons that can unite, build, and strengthen, or divide, wreck, and scatter (Etta & Mogu 2012:188). Considering African *botho's* communal character, no one individual is a reservoir of all knowledge. This knowledge is connected to the communal humanism of the African, in which case, success in any event is attributed to the complimentary effort of all sections of the society. Knowledge, wisdom, and success portray interdependence as a fruitful criterion for achieving one's goal in life, because proverbs are applied in events that affect humans socially (Etta & Mogu 2012:193).

The first proverb to be considered, regarding the individual's achievements through the community, is *bontsi bo bolaya noga* [many kill a snake]. In some instances, it is said *bobedi bo bolaya noga* [two kills a snake]. It is commonly said in English that two heads are better than one, or majority rules. A task that is jointly sponsored is easily accomplished. In this case, an isolationist who thinks he or she can survive in life without mutual learning from the experiences, mistakes, and achievements of other members, has a high possibility to fail in the race of life. This proverb stresses the need for teamwork as the key to unity and success. An individual's aspirations and victories are the complimentary results of combined efforts of the community. This complimentary feature of the wholistic thought pattern in African epistemology is captured by Hamminga (2005:58) by saying: 'knowledge is one form of togetherness. Togetherness is our ultimate criterion of any action, the pursuit of knowledge being just one of them'.

Teamwork accomplishes one's goals in life, as expressed in *letsema*, which is 'coming together with others for others'

(Resane 2017:99). No individual can arrive at success on his own. Ethics of complementarity is expressed through *bontsi bo bolaya noga*, which can also be perceived to mean the majority wins. Hence another Setswana proverb speaking in the same vein, *Kgetsi ya tsie e kgontwa ke go tshwaraganelwa*, meaning a heavy load becomes lighter when carried by a group of people. There is strength in numbers. This proverb encourages cooperation and support to one another in the community. The biblical (Ec 4) injunction reinforces or is reinforced by *bontsi bo bolaya noga* that:

Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: If one falls, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up! Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken. (vv. 9–12 NIV)

This proverb teaches us of the importance of complementarity. There is no complementarity without communality. Isolationism, individualism, and singleness are foreign to African communalism. Furthermore, since Africans hate or revere *noga* [snake], it is regarded as an enemy. In some cases, *noga* is associated with witchcraft – always as an agent used by witches to go and do some harm. An individual cannot kill the enemy alone. He needs others to defeat an enemy. Trying to live an individualistic life is not in line with Christian principles, as Christians derive strength and courage from fellowshiping with others. *And let us consider how we may spur one another on towards love and good deeds* (Heb 10:24 NIV). The proverb goes with another one that says *Sedikwa ke ntša-pedi ga se thata* [attacks by two dogs can easily be defeated], and the other one that says *Motho ga a iphetse e se naga* [one alone cannot master the forest]. No person can master everything by themselves. They need others to surround them to articulate them towards achieving or succeeding in life. *Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another* (Heb 10:25 NIV). Theologically, humans are precious because they are the *imago Dei* carriers as they are created in the image of God, therefore designed to be in partnership with God to sharpen each other towards the restoration of that God's image, which is marred by human depravity. African humanness [*botho*] is 'the ethical consciousness of other people, individually and collectively, as precious beings' (Peck 1994:61).

It is within African nature that people live for each other rather than living for the self. For instance, one common proverb says *Mabogo dinku a thebana* [hands are like sheep, they help each other]. A hand needs another to be scratched or massaged [*mabogo a tlhatswana*]. It is like 'scratch my back so that I could scratch yours'. People are meant to help each other. Like all other related proverbs within the Setswana epistemology, this proverb expresses 'the ethics of humanness, togetherness, and harmonious coexistence' (Resane 2023:3). The proverb emphasises cooperation, partnership, and solidarity within the community. It is within the community that one finds importance, a sense

of belonging or identity. The existence of this sense assures an individual that they are not alone to face the challenges of life. The community is there to protect and promote them in life.

The proverb is supported by another one that says *matlo go ša mabapi*, meaning 'when your neighbour's house catches fire, you should feel as though it's your own house that is on fire'. People help each other. People bail each other out in times of crisis. They share weal and woe. It is imperative for community members to work together. Failure to cooperate labels one a social misfit, or even an outcast. Societal harmony entails humanity to others and good understanding of fellow community members. This is confirmed by Shutte (2001:105) that 'human beings are self-determining, and other-dependent. Human beings are self-determining through other dependence'. Community members strive for quality of life, or better life for all. The community Jos does this as an entire entity. One must take the neighbour's problems and challenges as one's own because whatever affects the neighbour may affect oneself. One sees the ethic of empathy and living together in unity in a cordial manner. When the enemy hurts one, it hurts all. The community is interlinked, therefore have common enemies or foes.

When an individual finds rootedness in the community, there develops a sense of patriotism. People dislocated or dislodged from their ancestral land or home will always reminisce about their original home. Remember the mournful song of Jewish exiles in Psalm 137. When they remembered Zion their homeland, they wept over the loss of lives of their loved ones, losing almost everything they owned, religious worship in the temple in the holy city. The patriotic spirit rose within them as they remembered their pleasant and blessed past. Life in captivity is not communal, as they lived like slaves in their disjointed kinships. This is when the Setswana proverb comes into play: *Gaabo motho go thebe phatshwa* [There's no place like home]. There are two other proverbs with the same meaning: *Goo rra modubu ke kwa nokeng*, and *Goo rramotho ke goo rramotho*. Charity begins at home. No matter the socio-economic condition, one's home is always one's haven where emotional fulfilment is reached. Remember though that an African home is not made up of a family unit of a father, mother, and children. It stretches far beyond as Tembo explains:

African family is a very broad concept which has challenging variations across the continent. These variations are caused by differences in tribal customs or culture according to geography, history, religion, external influence of colonialism, inter migration, political and economic structures, and influence.¹

In a real sense, the African family is a community. This community is settled in a home which provides a sense of humanness, identity, and security. This is where one experiences love, acceptance, and motivation. 'The relationship between the people and the family, if understood as something natural in this way, is remarkably similar to the relationship of ubuntu between two persons' (Shutte 2001:107). It is a

1. <https://wp.bridgewater.edu/mtembo/articles/the-traditional-african-family/#Footnotes>

community that offers assurance of livelihood, despite shortcomings that may exist, such as lack of food or any form of luxury. This is where *botho* comes into play: 'the essence of a human being, the divine spark of goodness inherent within each of us. It inculcates a spirit of interdependence, reciprocity, dignity, the common good and peaceful coexistence' (Kuscus 2021:9). It kicks off the emergence of home charity, the patriotic sense. Patriotism is the inner core of nationalism. Displaced people feel stripped of their dignity that was offered by their family in their communities in their national homeland. Outside *gaabo motho* [home] one feels vulnerable, insecure, and unsheltered against physical, mental, and emotional harms. Losing one's home is losing one's sense of community and exposes one to undignified and shameful senses.

The last proverb to consider regarding theological ethics is the popular one: *Ngwana sejo o a tlhakanelwa*, or *Ngwana kgetsinyatsie, o a tshwaraganelwa*. Both proverbs mean a child belongs to the mother, the family, and the community at large. We hear it all the time that it takes a village to raise a child. From its analytical understanding, Reupert et al. (2022) imply that this proverb literally means:

[I]t takes many people [*the village*] to provide a safe, healthy environment for children, where children are given the security they need to develop and flourish, and to be able to realize their hopes and dreams. (p. 2)

The village represents the community that is endowed with diverse gifts, talents skills, arts, etcetera that are readily available to home a growing member of the community [*ngwana*]. Caring for children is a responsibility of many.

Conclusion: There is hope

Ethics and morality are dwindling in African cultural fabrics. Theology seems to be failing to address ethical issues faced by Africans. This is due to theology that is still wrapped and packaged in western epistemologies. African hermeneutics seem to be blunted, because African preachers fail to articulate the gospel in a language that the audience can fathom. The main contributor to this shortcoming is the lack of African proverbial expressions to communicate the gospel substance. However, I agree with Magesa (2010:56) that there is some glimmer of hope. This hope is necessitated by the facts that Africans are unhappy about their state of national and personal morality, yet they still 'believe that their future depends on the ethical conduct of their members' (Bujo 2016:24). Africans are continuously embarking on becoming self-critical and anxious to discover solutions to their moral problems. In their self-discovery journey, they realise that their epistemologies are still embraced, appreciated, and welcomed by the majority in both urban and rural settings. This echoes Bediako's assertion that rehabilitating Africa's heritage and religious consciousness, has been pursued as self-consciously Christian and theological, an endeavour at demonstrating the true character of African Christian identity (2004:51). African gospel communicators are encouraged to vehemently embark on what Magesa (2010:56) calls, 'popularisation', which is the

best way moral theology will be at the best service of the Church and the world.

The education system in churches and schools should include proverbs in their curriculum processes. By doing so, ethics will be restored in the community life, especially in interrelationships. The education of values through African philosophy possesses a high possibility of creating a healthy community. Shutte (2001:114) is correct by saying that 'becoming conscious of and committed to values is of course at the very heart of education for humanity'. The same fact is highlighted by Bujo (2016:24), that 'the children are to internalise these as lessons for daily dealings with their fellow human beings'. Proverbs play a decisive role in communicating ethical goods and correct behaviour.

Furthermore, African theologians or gospel communicators should embark on articulating the gospel through the lenses of African epistemologies, using African proverbs and idioms to engross the message of Christ. The pulpit ministry should be contextualised, though this may be a hurdle to jump over for many African preachers, as they received their ministerial trainings based on western epistemologies, including hermeneutics. Iheanacho (2021:86) decries this status quo when he says: 'Without consciously intending it, the Church, with its Eurocentric worldview, through its missionary foot soldiers, exported European Christianity together with its culture and civilisation'. The current scenario calls for inculturation or contextualisation of the gospel. However, let it be noted that inculturation is a process, a progressive exercise never to be completed in any foreseeable future. It is an eschatological journey, but in the meantime, let us adopt what O'Murchu (2021:13) captures: 'Integration of diverse empowering resources becomes the new theological horizon'.

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