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Encoding technology in tradition: Artifacts in proverbs as indicators of Historical Technological Development in Northern Sotho in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

This study examines material artifacts referenced in Northern Sotho proverbs as indicators of historical technological development. It seeks to demonstrate how proverbs preserve knowledge of past technologies and material culture, addressing the scarcity of written records on Northern Sotho artifacts and their technological significance. Grounded in theories of material culture and ethnolinguistics, the study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design. Proverbs containing references to material artifacts such as domestic tools, household items, agricultural implements and hunting tools were purposively sampled from secondary sources, including journals, books, dissertations, articles, and relevant websites. The analysis draws on folklore studies, linguistic and cultural history to interpret the cultural and technological meanings embedded in the proverbs. The findings reveal that material artifacts embedded in Northern Sotho proverbs reflect distinct stages of technological advancement, modes of production, craftsmanship, and social organization. Beyond their metaphorical and moral functions, these artifacts serve as historical markers that offer insights into everyday life and technological practices of past Northern Sotho communities. The study highlights the richness of indigenous oral literature as a reliable source for reconstructing technological history where written documentation is limited. The study recommends further research on the influence of material artifacts in proverbs on language development, symbolism, and metaphor formation, as well as comparative studies across other African languages. The study contributes theoretically by positioning proverbs as semiotic artifacts that mediate language, technology, and culture. It reinforces the value of indigenous oral literature as an important resource for understanding historical technological knowledge in African societies.

Keywords: Artifacts in proverbs, Material culture, Historical technological development, Indigenous knowledge systems, Oral literature.

INTRODUCTION

Proverbs are regarded as mini folk poems that add flavor to conversations or writing. Therefore, they are not merely linguistic embellishments; they are cultural archives that encode a community's

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worldview, social norms, and technological history.[1] In African societies, including the Northern Sotho-speaking communities, proverbs frequently reference objects, tools, and processes that reveal the technological realities of earlier periods. These artifacts such as agricultural implements, domestic tools, attire, and hunting equipment, serve as indicators of historical technological development. By analysing the material references embedded in proverbs, one gains insight into the evolution of technology, the socio-economic conditions of the people, and the cultural significance of these tools. The study of technology's impact on traditional artifacts in proverbs reveals a complicated interplay between innovation and preservation.[2]

Proverbs, as cultural and technological repositories, function as cultural memory systems. They preserve knowledge through metaphor and imagery, ensuring that information is transmitted across generations. When these metaphors incorporate artifacts, they implicitly record the technological environment of the society that created them. This paper summarises the artifacts in proverbs as indicators of historical technological development in Northern Sotho in four major categories, from which most of the data were collected from the book *Marema ka dika tša Sesotho sa Leboa* by Rakoma (1978).

Despite the rich presence of material artifacts in proverbs, there is limited scholarly research that systematically examines these proverbs as sources of historical technological knowledge.[3] Existing studies on Northern Sotho proverbs have largely focused on their moral, linguistic, and aesthetic functions, while neglecting their potential to reveal information about past technologies, tools, and material practices. Furthermore, the limited availability of written historical records on technological development within Northern Sotho communities has led to significant gaps in understanding the evolution of technological knowledge and material culture over time. Lack of focused research limits the recognition of indigenous oral literature, particularly proverbs, as valuable repositories of historical and technological information.[4] From the given problem statement, the following research objectives can be logically formulated:

- To identify and categorise material artifacts referenced in Northern Sotho proverbs in order to document the types of technologies, tools, and material practices embedded in indigenous oral literature.
- To analyse how material artifacts in Northern Sotho proverbs reflect historical stages of technological development and social organisation within Northern Sotho communities.
- To demonstrate the value of Northern Sotho proverbs as sources of historical technological knowledge, thereby contributing to the recognition of indigenous oral literature as an important alternative to limited written historical records.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Existing studies on African oral traditions, proverb theory, and indigenous knowledge systems demonstrate that proverbs serve not only as linguistic and cultural expressions but also as repositories of practical knowledge shaped by specific socio-historical contexts.

Fortes indicate that proverbs, as a sample of African oral traditions, constitute a literary resource and a literary potential that carry values, beliefs, customs in a nutshell, the worldview of African cultures. [5] Metaphor, wisdom, sarcasm, happiness, schooling, humour, tenderness, ethics, disappointment, praise, etiquette, friendship, enmity, religion, human ways of communication and war are among others which are conveyed through African proverbs.

Essuman et al. argue that artifacts in proverbs are employed in diverse ways to fulfil multiple communicative and sociocultural functions within African traditional contexts. These functions

[1] Adie Anthonia Ugiebeme et al., "The Intersection of Tradition and Technology: Impact on Art Practices and Preservation," *Journal Of Arts Humanities And Social Sciences* 4, no. 3 (2025): 5–12.

[2] Ugiebeme et al., "The Intersection of Tradition and Technology: Impact on Art Practices and Preservation."

[3] Jonathan Essuman, Elvis Rescue, and Philomena A. O. Yeboah, "A Pragma-Stylistic Approach to Analysing Proverbs: A Review of Some Selected Proverbs in Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart and Arrow of God," *E-Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences (EHASS),* 2, no. 8 (2021): 92–107.

[4] Ahmed S. Abou-Zaid, "The US Folklore, Proverbs, and Economic Behavior,"*Economics & Sociology* 6, no.2(2013):126–34.

[5] A. Fortes, "Africa Viewed through Its Proverbs and Literature," *European Scientific Journal* 1 (2014): 557–65.

include, but are not limited to, the confirmation of opinions, the issuance of warnings, the expression of regret and doubt, and the provision of justification, among others.[6]

Mambo argued that proverbs can be used to support problem-solving, reasoning, creativity, innovation and invention in design and computing. Knowledge-based repositories are employed to create and manage sources of expertise within specific sectors of a country. For example, an agricultural knowledge-based repository can be developed using an ontology of concepts to facilitate the sharing and reuse of knowledge.[7]

Mambo found that different proverbs provide distinct tools for addressing various aspects of artificial intelligence and bioinspired design. Artificial proverbs perform multiple functions such as guiding strategy, enhancing motivation, and supporting other cognitive processes that assist with problem solving and decision making.[8] Moreover, everyday people can transform their observations of nature into practical solutions to the challenges they encounter, a process that can be strengthened through appropriate methods.

Seanego and Matabola found that semantic analysis reveals widespread misunderstanding of Northern Sotho gender-related proverbs among speakers, writers, teachers, and the broader language community.[9] Although proverbs are rooted in oral tradition and are inherently figurative, they are frequently interpreted in a literal manner. Consequently, many language practitioners misconstrue the meanings of these gendered proverbs when applying them to real-life contexts. Alternatively, the present study examined the interpretation of artifacts in Northern Sotho proverbs and likewise recognises that many Northern Sotho speakers tend to misinterpret the use of such artifacts when applying these proverbs in real-life contexts.

Ramohlale et al. analysed selected proverbs from Rakoma's *Marema-ka-Dika* to determine whether they remain meaningful and appropriate for contemporary society. It uses a textual analysis anchored in a Socio-cultural Evolution Model to interpret, evaluate, and judge the relevance of the proverbs in modern contexts, especially considering cultural and social change.[10] The analysis involves identifying proverbs, translating them, unpacking their literal and figurative meanings, and then assessing whether their implied values or lessons still hold relevance in 21st-century socio-cultural life. Similarly, this study identified proverbs that incorporate material artifacts, translated them, explicated their literal and figurative meanings, and analysed the cultural and semantic significance of artifacts within these proverbs.

The literature reviewed in this section has examined scholarly work relevant to the encoding of technological knowledge in Northern Sotho proverbs, with particular attention to how material artifacts referenced in these proverbs function as indicators of historical technological development. Scholars view African proverbs as wisdom tools enabling communication, sociocultural functions, problem-solving, creativity, and innovation in traditional and technological contexts.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study is grounded in Ethnolinguistic theory supported by Material Culture theory. Ethnolinguistic theory studies the interdependence of language, culture, and worldview.[11] This theory suggests that ethnolinguistic theory assumes that:

- Language encodes cultural knowledge
- Cultural practices (including technology) shape linguistic expressions
- Oral traditions preserve historical experience
- Meaning is grounded in lived, material realities

[6] Essuman, Rescue, and Yeboah, "A Pragma-Stylistic Approach to Analysing Proverbs: A Review of Some Selected Proverbs in Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart and Arrow of God."

[7] Wangai Njoroge Mambo, "A Review of Proverbs in Computing and Design," *International Journal on Advances in ICT for Emerging Regions (ICTer)* 17, no. 4 (2025).

[8] Mambo, "A Review of Proverbs in Computing and Design."

[9] James Seanego, "(Re) Visiting the Semantics of Some Northern Sotho Gender-Related Proverbs: A Gender Schema Analysis," *Southern African Journal for Folklore Studies* 35, no. 1 (2026): 12-pages.

[10] M. I. Ramohlale, O R Chauke, and Mphoto J Mogoboya, "A Transformative Depiction of the Dilemmas of Women by Selected Northern Sotho Poets," *Journal of Critical Reviews* 8, no. 2 (2021): 360–66.

[11] Ismael Silva-Fuenzalida, "Ethnolinguistics and the Study of Culture," *American Anthropologist* 51, no. 3 (1949): 446–56.

- Material objects in language are symbolic, not just literal.

Northern Sotho proverbs often mention tools, materials, production processes, and environmental interactions, making them ideal data for ethnolinguistic analysis.

This study also draws on Material culture theory to interpret Northern Sotho proverbs as repositories of technological knowledge, arguing that references to material artifacts within oral tradition encode historical patterns of technological development and cultural practice

Material culture theory posits that objects (artifacts, tools, technologies) are not only functional but also carriers of meaning.[12] Proverbs referencing items such as *ploughs*, *grindstones*, *looms*, *boats*, or *iron tools* reveal:

- The technological landscape of a given period
- The social importance of technologies
- The symbolic value assigned to technological artifacts

Thus, artifacts in proverbs are treated as semiotic markers of the material culture from which they originated. Material culture examines a society or community by analysing its artifacts to understand the beliefs, values, ideas, attitudes and assumptions that existed at a specific point in time.

METHODOLOGY

The methods of data collection adopted in this study were purely qualitative in nature. This article employed a qualitative research design, as subjective interpretation and inductive reasoning were used to explain and describe artifacts in proverbs as indicators of historical technological development in Northern Sotho. The study is therefore both explanatory and descriptive in nature. Thematic data analysis was applied to identify and interpret themes emerging from different categories of proverbs related to artifacts. Ethnolinguistic data drawn from books, journals, dictionaries, terminology lists, conference papers, and scholarly articles relevant to the topic were systematically analysed. The study purposively selected 12 proverbs based on their relevance to the linguistic, cultural, historical, and technological dimensions of the research. Only proverbs explicitly referencing tangible artifacts, tools, instruments or manufactured objects associated with technologies historically used within African Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Northern Sotho communities were included. The thematic analysis is based on the content and context in which these proverbs have been used to bring about the various meanings and functions of the artifacts. To ensure the quality and reliability of the data, the researcher personally collected information from pre-existing and credible sources.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Artifacts in proverbs serve as concrete, shared symbols that bridge the gap between abstract wisdom and daily life, ensuring the transmission of cultural knowledge and moral guidance across generations.[13]

This paper analyses artifacts embedded in proverbs as indicators of historical technological development in Northern Sotho, structured around the following three key themes namely proverbs related to agricultural tools, proverbs related to domestic utensils, and proverbs related to hunting and pastoral equipment. Most language speakers misinterpret the meanings of these proverbs when applying them to real-life contexts, and the misinterpretations usually occur due to either a lack of knowledge or an overall ignorance of the semantics of proverbs.[14] The following themes are discussed based on Northern Sotho proverbs, focusing on their literal meaning, figurative meaning, linguistic meaning, cultural context and social function.

[12] Jules David Prown, "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method," *Winterthur Portfolio* 17, no. 1 (1982): 1–19.
[13] Prown, "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method."
[14] Ndzalama Maluleke, "Decoding Figurative Folklore: A Case of Xitsonga Proverbs," *Southern African Journal for Folklore Studies* 33, no. 2 (December 31, 2024), https://doi.org/10.25159/2663-6697/12813.

Proverbs related to agricultural tools

Traditionally, Northern Sotho communities were predominantly subsistence farmers. Agricultural tools were not merely utilitarian objects but symbols of survival, diligence, cooperation, and responsibility.[15] The following proverbs are discussed in this section:

Mogoma wa sebodu o bola le mong wa ona

Literal meaning: *The hoe of the lazy person becomes rotten with the owner*

Figurative meaning: *Motho ge a na le selo gomme a sa rate go se nea bao ba se hlokago, etšwe e le gore le yena ga a se šomiše, gona selo seo se ka se ke sa mo hola ka selo go fihlela se mo senyegela.*[16]
'*When a person has something and does not like to give it to those who need it, even though he himself is not using it, then that thing will never benefit him in any way until it ends up being wasted or destroyed*'

Linguistically, the hoe (*mogoma*) symbolises labour and endurance. This proverb emphasizes resilience and the cyclical nature of effort and reward in farming life. Linguistically, the use of the present tense universalizes the statement, suggesting an enduring truth rather than a situational observation.

Tšhemo ya thoko ya lala le ya gare e a lala

Literal meaning: The outer field is lying fallow, and the inner one is also lying fallow

Figurative meaning: *Molwedi wa gago ge a ka re a hlolwa, le wena a go lwelago o swanetše gore o no lahla marumo fase gobane ke gona ge le wena o lahlegile.*[17]
'*If your companion is defeated, then you too who is fighting alongside him must lay down your spears, because that is when you are also defeated*'.

Linguistically, the field (*tšhemo*) symbolises livelihood and responsibility, that is food, survival and productivity. A well-kept field represents diligence, order and foresight. A fallow or neglected field represents neglect, laziness, disorder or breakdown of responsibility.

Monna ke selepe, o lala a louditšwe

Literal meaning: A man is an axe; he goes to sleep sharpened.

Figurative meaning: *Motho ge a kgopela o mongwe gore a yo mo thuša modirong wa gagwe, o swanetše gore a mo laletše e sa le sebaka gore a itokišetše modiro woo a o kgopelwago, gobane ge mokgopelwa a ka se dire bjalo, mokgopelwa o tlo hwetšwa a iketše go ya gagwe mediro gomme a hloka sebaka sa go ya fao a biletšwago gona gore a yo thuša.*[18]
'*When you ask someone to go and help you with your work, you must invite him well in advance so that he can prepare for that task. This is because, if the person being asked is not given enough notice, he may already have made his own plans and will not have time to go to the place where he is being called to help*'

The axe symbolises a man's strength, usefulness and constant preparedness. Linguistically, in Northern Sotho communities, the verb *lala* literally denotes the act of extending an invitation well in advance. Similarly, the verb *loutšwa* 'sharpen' is used metaphorically to signify the preparation of an individual. In this proverb, the masculine noun *monna* 'man' does not carry a gender-specific reference but functions as a generic term for a person. The proverb thus conveys the normative principle that invitations should be issued timeously rather than at the last moment, as eleventh-hour invitations may lead to significant disappointment when the invitee is unprepared.[19]

[15] Prown, "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method."
[16] Joseph Ramathea Debele Rakoma, *Marema-Ka-Dika Tsa Sesotho Sa Lebowa* (JL van Schaik, 1995).
[17] Rakoma, *Marema-Ka-Dika Tsa Sesotho Sa Lebowa*.
[18] Rakoma, *Marema-Ka-Dika Tsa Sesotho Sa Lebowa*.
[19] Seanego, "(Re) Visiting the Semantics of Some Northern Sotho Gender-Related Proverbs: A Gender Schema Analysis."

Tšhilo le lwala re tšere le tlo šala le eja lewana
Literal meaning: We have taken the grinding stones; you will remain eating dried, cooked maize.
Figurative meaning: *Kgadi ya lapa ge e nyetšwe lapa leo le šala le dumetše gagologolo medirong ya lona, gona etšwe ba kua a nyaletšwego gona ba tlo golela godimo ba iteboga gobane lehono ba tlo godiša ya bona mediro ya Malapa.*[20]
'*When a woman in a family is married, that family greatly praises its own responsibilities/work. Likewise, the family she marries into will prosper and be thankful, because from that day they will grow and strengthen their own family responsibilities/work*'.

The proverb *tšhilo le lwala re tšere, le tlo šala le eja lewana* uses *grinding stones* (tšhilo le lwala) and *dried, cooked maize (lewana)* as powerful cultural symbols rather than literal food items. In many Southern African societies, including Northern Sotho, grinding stones symbolise: the means of production - the tools needed to turn raw grain into meal and self-sufficiency and continuity - the ability to prepare food regularly.

Generally, the proverb implies that whoever possesses the grinding stones controls *how* and *what* people eat. *Lewana*, referring to maize that has already been dried and cooked, requires no further grinding; however, it is regarded as nutritionally and socially inferior to freshly prepared meal produced through grinding stones (*tšhilo le lwala*). The consumption of *lewana* signifies subsistence on pre-processed food and reflects an absence of the capacity to prepare fresh sustenance. The proverb thus conveys that the loss of productive tools or foundational means of production is more detrimental than the loss of food itself. Deprivation of such means results in dependency and perpetuates material and social decline.

The study finds that agricultural tools frequently appear in proverbs, reflecting the intimate relationship between material culture and worldview. Agricultural tools such as the *mogoma* 'hoe*', tšhemo* 'field', *selepe* 'axe' and *tšhilo le lwala* 'grinding stones' carry deep symbolic meanings within Northern Sotho communities. They represent moral values such as diligence, responsibility, cooperation, endurance, and social obligation. This confirms Prown's view that material culture embodies social values and belief systems.[21]

Proverbs related to domestic utensils
Domestic utensils may be classified into those used in the preparation of food and those used in the cleaning of clothing and household furnishings. Rooted in the routines of household life, such proverbs draw on familiar objects such as pots, knives, spoons, mortar and pestle, hearths, and vessels to communicate abstract moral lessons, social norms, and practical philosophies.

Mosadi o swara thipa ka bogaleng
Literal meaning: A woman holds a knife by the sharp edge.
Figurative meaning: *Mosadi o ikemišeditše go kgotlelela bohloko, mathata goba boineelo bja gagwe ka lebaka la lapa la gagwe goba batho ba a ba ratago*.
'*A woman is willing to endure pain, hardship or personal sacrifice for the sake of her family or loved ones.*'

Linguistically, the proverb uses metaphor as its primary rhetorical device. The *thipa* (knife) symbolises danger, hardship, or sacrifice, while *bogale* (sharp edge) represents pain, risk, and personal harm. To s*wara thipa ka bogaleng* (hold a knife by the sharp edge) implies deliberately enduring suffering to protect others or achieve a greater good. The proverb emphasises the self-sacrificial role of women, particularly within traditional African societies. It reflects the expectation that women endure emotional, physical, and social hardships for the well-being of their families and communities. Women are portrayed as protectors who absorb pain so that others, especially children and husbands, may be spared.

[20] Rakoma, *Marema-Ka-Dika Tsa Sesotho Sa Lebowa*.
[21] Prown, "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method."

Ya boela pitšeng e a swa
Literal meaning: It dies if it returns to the pot.
Figurative meaning: *Motho ge a ka re mola a sodilwe ka lebaka la bobe bjoo a bo dirilego gomme a hlwa a sa boelela go senya gape gona kotlo yeo a tlogo otlwa ka yona e tlo ba ye kgolo ka go fetiša.*[22]
'*If a person is punished because of the wrongdoing he committed and then repeats the offense again, the punishment he will receive will be very severe*'.

In the proverb *pitša* 'pot' symbolises a place of heat, danger, trial or harm. Culturally, the proverb warns that going back to a harmful, rejected, or already failed situation will destroy you. Once something has been removed from the *pitša* 'pot' (the source of danger or trouble), returning to it leads to death or ruin**.** The proverb expresses the idea that repeating mistakes after being warned or disciplined leads to serious consequences. It can apply beyond legal punishment to life situations such as school, work, or personal behaviour, emphasizing that failure to learn from past mistakes results in harsher outcomes.

Lehu re hwile la pitšana la segwana le a rokwa
Literal meaning: We have died the death of the clay pot; the calabash one can be stitched.
Figurative meaning: *Ke ge motho a senyegeletšwe ke selo seo a ka se kego a kgona go se tsošološa gape le ge a ka hlwa a ratile bjang le bjang goba ge motho a lobile thoto ya gagwe o fela a lla sello se sešoro, gobane a tseba ge a ka se ke a hlwa a sa kgona go kgoboketša thoto yeo gape bjalo ka ge a kile a e kgobokanya.*[23]
'*When a person has been ruined by something that they can never restore again, no matter how much they may wish to do so, or when a person has lost their property, they usually cry bitterly, because they know that they will never again be able to rebuild that property in the same way they once did'*

The word *lehu* 'death' is used metaphorically, not literally. It intensifies the finality that is not just loss, but complete destruction. Every day, traditional objects are used to convey deep wisdom. A clay pot shatters completely when it falls, and once broken, it is beyond repair. A calabash (gourd), even if cracked, can often be stitched, bound, or mended and reused. The proverb reflects Northern Sotho speakers' cultural values of realism, moral consequence and communal wisdom.

Gabo lefšega ga go ribegwe mogopo
Literal meaning: At the coward's home, the wooden bowl is not turned upside down.
Fgurative meaning: *Motho ge a le mogale tlhabanong, go hwa ka pela ke ga gagwe, fela lefšega lona ka gobane le boifa go hlabana le dikotsi tšeo tše šoro di ka mmolayago, gona le no fela le phela nako ye telele go fetiša mogale yoo a feletšego marumong.*[24]
'If a person is a brave warrior in battle, to die quickly is their fate; but cowardice, because he fears fighting and the severe dangers that could kill him, ends up living much longer than that brave warrior who perished on the battlefield'.

Culturally, in many Northern Sotho households, *mogopo* 'wooden bowl' is used to serve staple food (like *bogobe*). The *mogopo* 'wooden bowl' in the proverb serves as a symbol of material well-being and the tangible manifestations of hardship. When the bowl is turned upside down, it signifies the absence of food within the household, indicating hunger or scarcity. In this context, the proverb suggests that the household of a brave warrior who dies in battle will face hunger, whereas the household of a coward will continue to have food, represented by the wooden bowl remaining upright.

The findings reveal that Northern Sotho proverbs related to domestic utensils constitute a significant yet often overlooked subset of traditional wisdom, reflecting the intimate relationship between everyday material culture and collective social values. What a household uses, makes, or owns reveals its level of skill, order and cultural technology. By transforming ordinary domestic tools into

[22] Rakoma, *Marema-Ka-Dika Tsa Sesotho Sa Lebowa*.
[23] Rakoma, *Marema-Ka-Dika Tsa Sesotho Sa Lebowa*.
[24] Rakoma, *Marema-Ka-Dika Tsa Sesotho Sa Lebowa*.

symbolic language, these proverbs bridge the mundane and the didactic, making complex ideas accessible across generations. This directly supports the idea that domestic utensils reflect household technologies and living standards.

Proverbs related to hunting and pastoral equipments

Hunting was a major means of acquiring meat, skins and status; therefore, hunting and pastoral equipment were vital to the economic survival, cultural traditions and social structure of African-speaking communities.[25] Through hunting, communities supported food production, clothing, rituals, and the transmission of cultural values from one generation to another. Proverbs using hunting equipment often teach persistence, strategy and respect for skill.

Below is a clear explanation of how Northern Sotho proverbs related to hunting and pastoral equipment illustrate resource acquisition, survival and economic wisdom in traditional society.

Lerumo le tee ga le bolaye kgomo

Literal meaning: One spear does not kill a cow.

Figurative meaning: *Go nea motho mpho ga go thabiše go fetiša ge motho yoo a filwe mpho makga a mabedi goba go fetiša.*[26]

'*To give a person a gift does not make him happier than when that person is given a gift twice or more times.*

One person, one effort, or one action alone is often not enough to accomplish a big task. It emphasises the value of teamwork, cooperation, and collective effort. In traditional contexts, a *lerumo* 'spear' was a primary hunting and fighting tool, but one spear alone was often insufficient to bring down a large animal like a cow. Success required many spears and coordinated action. In other words, major challenges or goals require many people working together, just as killing a cow requires more than a single spear.

Ditau tša hloka seboka di šitwa le ke nare e hlotša

Literal meaning: Lions that fail to hunt together are defeated by a limping buffalo.

Figurative meaning: *Batho ge ba hloka kwano magareng ga bona ba ka se ke ba kgona selo mešomong ya bona ka moka, gobane le mešongana ye menyane fela e ka phethegago go se bothata e tlo no ba palela gobane ba tlo hloka kwano le go phela ka diphapano godimo ga mediro yeo ya bona.*[27]

'*When people lack unity among themselves, they will not be able to accomplish anything in all their work, because even small tasks that could be completed without difficulty will fail, as they will lack cooperation and will live with differences and conflicts in their work'*.

Linguistically, the proverb uses metaphor and imagery drawn from the natural world.

- *Ditau* 'lions' symbolise strength, power, and leadership.
- *Nare e hlotša* 'a limping buffalo' represents a weak or disadvantaged opponent.

The contrast between powerful lions and a weakened buffalo intensifies the message: even the strongest fail without unity. The proverb warns that leadership without consultation (*seboka* 'a gathering or council') is ineffective. Decisions made without collective input can undermine even the strongest authority.

In traditional African communities, survival depended on cooperation, whether in hunting, farming, or conflict, and in modern contexts such as politics, workplaces and families. The proverb reinforces the belief that unity ensures survival and progress, while division invites defeat. The proverb serves as a didactic tool, teaching younger generations the importance of teamwork, humility, and mutual dependence.

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[25] Mica B. Jones et al., "Hunting and the Social Lives of Southern Africa's First Farmers," *Journal of Archaeological Research* 32, no. 4 (December 4, 2024): 597–636, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10814-023-09194-y.

[26] Rakoma, *Marema-Ka-Dika Tsa Sesotho Sa Lebowa*.

[27] Rakoma, *Marema-Ka-Dika Tsa Sesotho Sa Lebowa*.

The proverb communicates that strength lies in unity. Linguistically, it showcases metaphor and brevity; culturally, it reinforces communal values, shared leadership, and cooperation. Cooperation is essential for survival or success in hunting. Hunting requires collective effort; hunters prosper when they work together.

Epiša motsomi sebata matšatši a le hlwele bohle
Literal meaning: Help the hunter to search for the animal (through digging) so that the days be successful for you all.
Figurative meaning: *Go thuša motho bothateng le bonabeng bja gagwe ke go tiiša kagišano le kwano magareng ga lena.*[28]
'*To help a person in his difficulty and against enemies is to strengthen cooperation and harmony between you*'.

The Northern Sotho proverb *epiša motsomi sebata, matšatši a le hlwele bohle* carries deep cultural and social significance within the community. In traditional Northern Sotho society, hunting was not only a personal activity but a communal responsibility. Helping the hunter ensured food and survival for everyone. The saying teaches that when people work together, the benefits are shared by all. It promotes the idea that helping others ultimately helps oneself. By assisting the hunter, the community secures successful days (matšatši a le hlwele), symbolising prosperity, peace, and well-being for everyone involved.

The proverb discourages selfishness. It reflects the African philosophy, Ubuntu/Botho: *a person is a person through others*. Success is not meant to be enjoyed alone but should uplift the whole community. Elders often use this proverb to teach younger generations about social responsibility, teamwork, and generosity, reinforcing acceptable behaviour and moral values in society. Generally, the proverb reminds the Northern Sotho community that cooperation ensures collective survival and prosperity, making it a cornerstone of their social and moral worldview.

Ge e re mee, e bitša modiši, e bitša diphukubje, e bitša tša gayo
Literal meaning: *When the animal cries, it calls the shepherd; when the jackals, it calls the family*
Figurative meaning: *Gantši motho a ka re a bega molato, gomme a gopotše go inamolela, mme a makale ge molato woo o swara yena, gomme a bile a otlwa ka lebaka la ona.*[29]
'*Most of the time an individual may report a wrongdoing under the assumption of exoneration yet be surprised when the same wrongdoing implicates oneself and results in punishment*'. Linguistically, the proverb symbolises the following:

- *e* represent an animal (a person, help seeker)
- *mee* represents the cry of an animal (especially livestock), often signalling pain, danger, or distress
- *modiši* refers to the shepherd (protector, caretaker)
- *diphukubje* refers to the jackals (predators, enemies, opportunists)
- *tša gayo* refers to its own people/family/community

The repetition of *e bitša* 'it calls' emphasises inevitability and simultaneity. In traditional African pastoral societies, an animal's cry is never neutral; it alerts the shepherd (protection, responsibility), predators (danger, exploitation) and other animals (belonging, shared fate).[30] Culturally, the proverb teaches that any public expression of distress, success, or conflict attracts multiple audiences such as helpers, enemies and relatives all at once**.** The wisdom of a proverb lies in the knowing of *when, how* and *to whom* one should cry (seek help).

[28] Rakoma, *Marema-Ka-Dika Tsa Sesotho Sa Lebowa*.
[29] Rakoma, *Marema-Ka-Dika Tsa Sesotho Sa Lebowa*.
[30] Jones et al., "Hunting and the Social Lives of Southern Africa's First Farmers."

RECOMMENDATIONS

This research on Northern Sotho artifacts in proverbs highlights the role of metaphor and material culture in preserving communal memory and technological implications embedded in proverbial references to tools, implements, and production practices. By engaging with interdisciplinary literature from linguistics, folklore studies and the history of technology, this review situates the current study within broader debates on oral knowledge transmission and technological history, while identifying gaps that justify a focused analysis of artifacts in Northern Sotho proverbs as encoded records of past technological realities. In educational settings, these proverbs are valuable resources for teaching language, culture, and indigenous knowledge systems. Future research could be conducted on how artifacts influence language development, vocabulary, symbolism and metaphors within a culture, strengthening the link between material culture and linguistic expression.

CONCLUSION

Northern Sotho proverbs encode a vast amount of information about the technological environments in which they were formed. From agricultural implements, domestic utensils, to hunting equipment, these artifacts reflect historical technological stages and their integration into social life. By analysing proverbs as cultural texts, one can reconstruct aspects of precolonial and early colonial Northern Sotho technological history, demonstrating that language is not only a means of communication but also a repository of technological knowledge. Artifacts are essential to understanding culture because they serve as tangible snapshots of a society's everyday life, beliefs, technologies, and values. As primary sources, they reveal how people lived, what they created, from tools to art, their social structures and their worldview, often providing insights that written texts cannot. By bridging gaps across time, artifacts enable historians and linguists to interpret past human experiences, social organization, economic systems, and even ways of thinking through material evidence such as hoes, calabashes, and spears.

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