

## The Healing Power: The Case of Malome and Motjhana in Sesotho

'Madira Thetso

Lecturer, University of the Witwatersrand Johannesburg, South Africa

Corresponding Author: 'Madira Thetso, E-mail: madira.thetso@gmail.com

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### ABSTRACT

Basotho consider themselves "Tjhabana sa kgomo" meaning people united by the cow. This means, it is a highly related nation. The family connections, most of which emanate from marriage are maintained and carried down to the subsequent generations. These bonds are highly valued and all parties have an obligation towards one another. Although everyone has a role in the maintenance of the bonds/networks, others are central in the kinship network. Using the functionalist theory, the paper explores the role of the maternal uncle 'malome' in the social well-being of his sister's children 'batjhana' and the rationale behind the role culture allotted him. The finding points at malome as a healer and a performer of some social rituals meant to save the lives of his batjhana. It is hypothesized that this follows the patriarchal nature of the Basotho nation. As a successor and constant member of the family malome is entrusted to be a primary linker in most kinship relationships.

### Introduction

A family is a group of individuals who are related either by blood, marriage or adoption. A family in this sense does not refer only to people staying under a single roof but to all those that are related in all the ways mentioned. According to Matšela (1990:02), a family refers to '*tikoloho ea batsoalani, baamani, motho le bang ka eena*'. From this definition, one depicts that a family is a situation of related individuals and or an individual and other people related to him or her. It is a belief, therefore, that social relations in Sesotho exceeds immediate family members. Sesotho describes the relationship of an individual to others in different kinship terms depending on whether they are from the mother or father's side, as exemplified below:

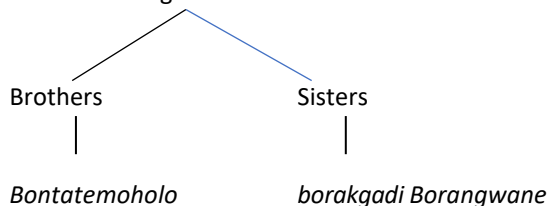
1a)

Biological mother



1b)

Biological father



The illustrations above depict both the maternal and paternal kinship terms in Sesotho. Biological mother's male siblings are termed *bomalome* 'uncles' regardless of whether they come first or after the mother while the sisters are differentiated by their order with the mother hence *bonkgono* 'grandmothers' for her elder sisters and *bomangwane* 'aunts' for the younger ones. On the contrary, the biological father's male siblings are differentiated while the female ones are not. Those who come are older are termed *bontatemoholo* 'grandfathers' and the younger ones are referred to as *borangwane* 'uncles'. As for biological father's sisters, a single kinship term *rakgadi* 'aunt' is used whether they are older or younger than the father. A child of an individual's aunt or uncle is termed cousin '*motswala*' while *malome* addresses his sister's children as *batjhana*. In Sesotho, unlike in English, there is one kinship term for niece and nephew *motjhana* regardless of gender. Looking at the English equivalences of the kinship terms, we can see that English does not differentiate between *malome* and *rangwane* as well as between *mmangwane* and *rangwane*. It also makes a distinction between *batjhana* (niece and nephew) while Sesotho does not. As Futhwa (2011) explains, the English version is not accepted in African society.

In Sesotho, like in most African societies, males have the most dominant status. This is evident in that after the girl and the boy marry the girl moves into the home of the boy. This process comes along with the change of maiden identity to that of the husband. Although the bride changes identity and becomes a member of the new family when the couple bears children, the two families are involved. For instance, in Sesotho, the first-born child is born at its mother's home. The groom's family takes their daughter-in-law back to her parents where she will stay until the child is born. After the birth of the child, both families give it a name. However, both the surname and the rituals performed for the child are from the paternal side. After giving birth, the bride and the child return to the groom's family where they both belong. The observation is that the bride's family and the in-law family remain bonded and they maintain the established bond to the subsequent generations. The paper inspects the role of *malome* as a healer of his *batjhana*. It goes further to explore why *malome* and not any other member of the family, is central to the relationship between the two families.

## Literature Review

The orality nature of the Sesotho culture poses problems for investigations. However, several scholars and researchers have shown interest in the Sesotho culture. Most scholarly works and research cover different cultural aspects such as language, norms (informal), rituals and values (Matšela, 1990; Lesitsi, 2010, Sekese, 2011; Futhwa, 2011). They look into the Basotho culture as a whole without focusing on any individual component. Most of the component elements are transmitted from one generation to another orally. They are presented in a form of proverbs, riddles, folktales, and clan poems. However, other scholars focus on individual cultural aspects such as language in particular proverbs (Mokitimi, 1997; Khotso, 2019), Taboos as cultural practices (Thetso & Qhala, 2014) and Marriage as a ceremony (Futhwa, 2015). They examine the role and importance of the mentioned aspects in the society.

## Methodology

The study adopts the qualitative case study method. It uses case studies as data collection tools as it seeks to understand a complex phenomenon (Stake 2006). The case study is a method under the qualitative approach that examines a phenomenon in its natural setting employing various methods to gather information (Yin, 2009). The approach is appropriate for this study because it permits the researcher to use interviews to explore and understand some of the rituals and to answer how and why questions. The researcher explores two distinct cases aiming at investigate the healing power bestowed in *malome* in the protection of the life of *motjhana*.

I collected data from two instances in the district of Maseru. The first instance was of a 70 years Mosotho woman who experienced ill health for a long time and through the performance of a ritual, she was healed. The second case relates the story of a 48-year Mosotho male who fell ill and likewise was saved through the ritual performed by his *malome*. Although the latter did not involve the ritual as it was supposed to be, it also

portrayed the healing power of *malome*. In addition to the cases, I interviewed three members of the community aged between 46 and 70. The choice of age was informed by the prohibition made to young people to question the norms, as that was regarded taboo. At the stipulated ages, the participants are adults and have a better knowledge of cultural activities.

I sought participants' consent for ethical purposes. I made them aware of their right to withdraw from the interview, could they at any point, feel uncomfortable. I requested the case participants to narrate how their illnesses started and the curative measures that they took to the end. I wrote all the details narrated by the case participants and recorded the stories to avoid missing some information. I supplemented the case studies with the interviews to solicit information on the rituals themselves and the reasons behind the choice of *malome* of all the relatives. I did not use the names of the participants for confidentiality purposes.

## Theoretical Framework

The study adopts the functionalist perspective to unpack the roles and responsibilities of *malome* 'uncle' to *motjhana* 'niece' and to account for the central role played by *malome* in maintaining the family bonds. According to Lumen, Herbert Spencer popularized the theory. The functionalist theory regards the family as a social institution that performs four basic functions, namely Protection, Reproduction, Socialization and Affection, and Companionship. That is a family gives birth to children and is responsible for their protection and upbringing.

In addition, parents monitor children's behavior and transmit to them the norms, values, and language of their culture. The care further extends to relatives who are expected to avail themselves in times of need. The theory considers these bonds emanating from marriage and reproduction and any others resulting from them, as basic. This set of relationships is termed kinship. This is one of the main organizing principles of society found in many societies. The maintenance of order and balance are key from a functionalist perspective, the disruption of which in one part is the disruption of the whole system. The perspective is suitable for the present study in that it seeks to investigate the social bonds between families and how they are maintained to promote both solidarity and stability within a society.

### **Malome: The healer**

Good health is basic to every individual. People strive hard to void all the actions or activities deemed hazardous to their lives. Basotho are no exceptions in this regard hence the proverb *Ho ipaballa ho molemo ho feta setlhare* translated, prevention is better than cure. In trying to protect their children, families as social institutions, instill in their members norms and values of their culture most of which recommend safety and good health. For instance, there are rules of good conduct referred to as Taboos (Thetso & Qhala, 2014). Such rules are Dos and Don'ts and mostly relate to youngsters to nurture them into healthy and responsible future adults. Regardless of cautions taken, people experience some ill health. Medical doctors or traditional healers '*dingaka tsa moetlo*' through their expertise, handle instances of this nature. However, some illnesses might occur that are believed to be beyond the doctors or traditional healers' expertise and require special treatment that includes the performance of some rituals. One such is *setshwa* and is healed by one's maternal uncle.

Basotho considers one's maternal uncle *malome* as one's healer. When one encounters illnesses such as *setshwa* or *maroko* he/she is taken to his/her *malome* for the cure. *Setshwa* is a rash that attacks a particular part of the body such as an arm, an ear, a leg, and a neck. The rash is irritating and needs scratching which leads to pain and spread of the illness to other parts of the body. *Maroko*, on the other hand, is a stat

e after a long illness where a patient starts dreaming about the departed relatives (Sekese, 2011). Basotho believe that the ancestors would be calling the patient to join them. They, therefore, would take the patient to his/her *malome* for a cure. In both cases, only *malome* and not anyone else would perform the rituals hoped to

remedy the mentioned illnesses. In Futhwa's (2011) view, below are cases that provide evidence.

### **Case 1: The healing of *setshwa***

Participant 1 is a 70-year Mosotho woman who experienced the illness from *setshwa*. She presented her case as follows:

I had a rash on my right leg at the beginning of the year 2015. The rash was so irritating that I would keep scratching my leg. It would feel better as I scratch but later painful. I would use some ointment to moisturize my skin that would be dry from scratching. At night, I would not cover the leg with blankets, as it would be very hot. I went to the doctor who diagnosed me with an allergy. The doctor told me that it was difficult to cure allergy without knowing the precise cause. He said food, plants, and cosmetics that an individual uses might cause allergy. However, I received treatment in the form of capsules and ointment to moisturize the affected area. To my surprise, the rash kept spreading. I visited several doctors, in some cases prohibitions were made regarding food and bath soaps, which I obeyed but in vain.

In a period of two months, the rash had covered my whole body. It was itchy that I would sometimes cry. I would sit by the wall and scratch my back, use both hands to scratch both my legs and arms. I would sometimes seek assistance from my grandchildren to scratch my back. Regardless of all the medication, my skin became pale and dry. Worst, my complexion darkened and I lost weight. I was bedridden though I would never sleep due to the discomfort. My children tried all they could to help me and took all those people presented to them in a form of advice and medication. I visited healing prophets, used several herbs to wash my body and drank various concoctions recommended by different people, but all in vain. One day, one of the old family friends visited me. Looking at me, he told us the disease was *setshwa* and only my maternal uncle could heal it. I was puzzled because I never knew any of my mother's brothers since I was young.

We searched until we found one member of my mother's family. Although she was not my uncle, she was authorized through a ritual, to act on behalf of my maternal uncle. The woman was old and sick and was a distant relative of my late mother. She offered to help and we arranged for the rituals. Accompanied by one of my daughters-in-law, I went to her place where the ritual would be performed and came back on the same day after the ritual. A month down the line, I felt better and could not believe that the itching had stopped, the paleness was going and the skin was retaining the moist. I gradually gained back my complexion and weight. One day at the time, I recovered. Although the part of the leg where the rash started is still dark, I have fully recovered.

### **Case 2: The healing of *Maroko***

Participant 2 is a 48-year Mosotho man who experienced body swelling. Likewise, he visited several practitioners and he did not get help. He narrated his story as follows:

I was a mineworker although I did not work underground. One day, I woke up with a swollen face. I was surprised and tried to think of the possible cause of the swelling. I tried to remember what I ate or where I walked in an attempt to solicit the cause but in vain. The swelling continued over the night and the following day I could not see properly. I consulted the doctor who gave me some medication. I used the treatment without success. The treatment came with a seven-day leave. I stayed home hoping for a speedy recovery but after seven days, my whole body had grown big that I could not wear my clothes. I went to a different doctor and they admitted me to train the water. They discharged me after three days but the swelling had not diminished. My feet could not take me anymore and I was bedridden. I was not able to feed or wash. I kept growing big daily. I nearly lost hope but one day a traditional healer visited me. He cleansed me in herbs and gave me concoctions to drink. I thought I would recover, but the swelling persisted. Some days later, my mother woke me up saying I was talking and crying in my sleep. She told me that I had been talking in the previous days but not crying. I was surprised because I could not remember myself even dreaming. Three days after that my

uncle's wife arrived. My mother told me that she had brought me a real doctor. By then, I would do and accept anything with the hope that it would cure me. My aunt told me that they could not afford an animal to perform the ritual but she believed that the ancestors would have mercy on me. She prepared a bath for me and washed my whole body. She was uttering some words as she washed me. After the bath, she took out a bottle of ointment and rubbed my body, still uttering some words. That day, she took care of me. She cooked, fed me and attended to all my needs. She left for work the following day and promised to come some other time to check on me. She assured me that I would get better because she had talked to my ancestors. I was so hopeless and could not believe any of what she was saying, considering all what we had done without success.

On the first day after her departure, I was able to sit on my bed. I was able to hold my drinking mug although I was still weak. I would sweat badly that I would change clothes at least thrice a day. One day at the time, I began to recover. I recovered my appetite and was able to feed myself. In two weeks, I had recovered. However, I was skinny that even the clothes I used to wear before the illness could not fit. Two weeks later, my aunt visited us. She found me up on my feet and was thankful. She told me that she came to help because my mother told her that I talked and screamed in my sleep. She referred to that as *maroko*. She said it happened when a person had been ill for a long time and that the departed are believed to be calling him/her to join them. As Basotho, they believed that only *malome* can pray the ancestors to leave the patient to live. I was so surprised but thanked God that I recovered from the illness.

## Discussion

*Setshwa* as defined earlier is an irritating rash that affects the specific part of the body. It has the potential of spreading to other parts of the body. For a cure, a person would go to his or her maternal. The patient (*motjhana*) would go to the uncle's home for the performance of the ritual. An animal is slaughtered and some parts are used as a cure for *setšoa*. According to Kapa (2019), both *malome* and *motjhana* (patient) leave the home early in the morning to an old rubbish hip '*thotobolo*' where *malome* takes the ash and put it in a mixture of different parts of the slaughtered animal. He then takes a coin and smear it with the mixture. He rubs the coin on the affected area after which he throws it away. In the process, *malome* utters some words reprimanding the disease. The two then go back home and the patient does not bath on that day. S/he then goes back to his/her home because s/he cannot sleepover at his or her uncle's home. Basotho have always believed this as the only cure for this kind of illness. *Malome* only, has the power to heal *motjhana*, hence the ritual to authorize any other member of the family to act in proxy of *malome*.

Bloodshed is vital in ritual performance. It is believed that it joins the living and the ancestors. However, note be taken that "People do not pray ancestors but observe certain practices in their name, as the closest Gods to man" (Futhwa, 2011:7). It is in this belief that any family member authorized to act in proxy of *Malome* do so through a certain ritual that itself involves bloodshed. Rituals themselves are static and are governed by strict rules. However, because their performance is subject to culture, the practical aspects of them vary from one clan/family to another. For instance, some clans may use a goat while others may use a sheep. In some instances, people may use a white chicken to perform a ritual and this is dependent upon individuals' economic stance.

In some instances, a person gets sick from any other illness. Having suffered for a long time it gets to where he or she dreams about the dead people. This then is termed *maroko* (sickness that results in dreaming about the dead). Lesitsi (2010) indicates that Basotho believe that the ancestors are calling him or her to join them. It is then that the person is taken to his uncle for a cure. An animal is slaughtered and some parts (*mohlehlo* and *nyooko*) be used as a medicine, while the rest of the meat will be eaten by anybody. *Malome* smears *motjhana* the whole body with the mixture of the parts of the animal and some other ingredients such as a plant termed *maroko*. This is the prayer through the ancestors that the patient be freed from illness. After this ritual, the patient is expected to get better.

However, in the case presented above, there was no blood shed. The presence of *Malome* and the talk to the ancestors are significant in the healing process. They show the strong belief the Basotho hold in the spiritual beings. The ritual was performed in a different way although it has the same meaning. Futhwa (2011) explains that rituals may be performed differently between families and clans due to the dynamism of culture. Looking at the literature, there are two descending views on who pray for the *maroko* patient. Contrary to what Lesitsi (2010) said, Sekese (2011) indicates '*ba mofuta oa hae ba mo tšoara ka matsoho 'meleng, ba ntse ba bua...*' In Sekese's (2011) view, not only Malome but also the other relatives could pray for the patient. However, the interviewees share Lesitsi's (2010) view that Malome is the only one entrusted to talk to the ancestors. The big question then remains.

#### I. WHY MALOME?

As said earlier, the orality nature of the Sesotho culture poses problems for research. It is not possible to find facts, especially because of the prohibitions made to the young ones questioning some occurrences. A Mosotho child was not allowed to ask 'why' if told to do or not do anything. However, based on the responses given by the participants, I observed the following.

The Sesotho says that *ngwana e moholo ke thaka ea ntatae* 'the elderly son is his father's age mate'. In raising his children, the former Mosotho man would share with his son all the information related to family matters. In this way, by the time he is called to his ancestors (passes on), the son would take over and be in charge of the family. Being in charge includes taking care of both widows and orphans left by his father. As Lebamang (2018) indicates, the son of the deceased would take care of all the females who were his father's responsibility, namely *borakgadi* 'aunties', *mme* 'mother' or *bomme* 'mothers' (in cases of polygamy) and sisters (siblings). According to Futhwa (2011), it is Malome's responsibility to ensure the appropriate upbringing of the sisters' children.

It is also stipulated in the Basutoland (1946) that the first-born male child is the inheritor of his father's assets. The law further stipulates that the heir inherits also the unallocated assets which he is expected to use with his father's widows. Although this is written down as a law, it relates to the former, which is a proverb. In a conversation with Lebamang (2018), it was observed that this resulted in parents regarding educating their daughters as a waste. It was said that the girl would be married to other people but the boy would remain in the family, thus the latter not the former should be educated for the benefit of the family.

Although put in different words, the saying *basetsana ke bana ba dikgaiseli tsa bona* 'females are children of their male siblings' gives power to males, not females. In this way, even in the presence of the father, the son is trained to take care of his female siblings. He would be responsible for his sisters and their children hence another saying, *bana ba kgaisedi ke bana ba ka* 'my sister's children are mine'. The successor would transfer his powers to his son and the son to his. This forms a chain that never ends in that it goes from one generation to another. The absence of a male child would result in polygamy because for the Basotho, such children preserve the legacy (Futhwa, 2011).

This section is a comparative or descriptive analysis of the study based on the study results, previously literature, etc. The results should be offered in a logical sequence, given the most important findings first and addressing the stated objectives. The author should deal only with new or important aspects of the results obtained. The relevance of the findings in the context of existing literature or contemporary practice should be addressed.

#### Conclusion

In this study I have examined the healing role of *Malome* on *motjhana* in Sesotho and have investigated the reasons behind Basotho entrusting him with the well-being of his *batjhana*. The observation, therefore, is that the son of the family is the successor, leader, primary linker, rescuer, custodian and culture transmitter. He

attains this position by being male in that he would constantly be part of the family as compared to his female siblings. It is through *malome* that the family legacy is conserved. As the male child of the family, he has to develop and unite its members and maintain all the family bonds. Since the child belongs to the two families (Maternal and paternal), *malome* is the representative of the maternal family in most cultural activities an individual engages in. He is entrusted with this position by the father and the whole family and his failure to maintain the bonds would result in instability hence the saying *leloko ha le ya baneng le ya timela*.

### Recommendations for Future Research

The study has revealed that *Malome* plays a significant role in the maintenance of stability and bonds within the family. There is need therefore to investigate:

- a. Other roles played by *Malome* in all stages of *motjhana's* growth and rites of passage.
- b. Any significant roles associated with any female members of the family. This will help to understand how the society view females.

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