The verse-form of Northern Sotho oral poetry

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Abstract

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*Although examples of certain Northern Sotho traditional oral genres have been collected over years, a study of verse-form in traditional initiation poetry has not yet been undertaken. This article will consider the way in which Northern Sotho traditional initiation poems are structured or arranged in verse-form. It will be attempted to indicate that traditional oral initiation poetry in Northern Sotho is not **metrically** defined (as in Western poetry) but that Northern Sotho oral poetry is also structured by its performance and by symmetrical boundaries and other techniques. The structure of the oral praise poem in verse-form as discussed in this article will show the way in which poetry material is organised according to Northern Sotho metrical (verse-form) principles.*

1. Introduction

Traditionally, oral poetry has been transmitted from one generation to the next by word of mouth. Boys and girls were taught to recite around the fire, and during initiation ceremonies to praise and compose praises for themselves. These praise songs promoted the ideals of action, womanhood and manhood. This transmission, however, no longer takes place. Although examples of some of these oral traditional genres have been collected, an in-depth study of verse-form in oral initiation praises has not been undertaken. As a result, researchers such as Opland (1983:159) and Rycroft (1960:304) consider performance as shaping the metrical arrangement of the traditional African (Xhosa or Zulu) praise poem. This hypothesis is, however, unacceptable with reference to the Northern Sotho oral genre. This article will, therefore, consider the way in which the Northern Sotho traditional oral initiation poem is arranged in verse-form. It will be attempted to indicate that in general, traditional oral poetry

in Northern Sotho is not necessarily metrically defined by its performance only (suggested by Opland and Rycroft, regarding Nguni praises), because the structuring of the performance is determined by the poet(s). According to this view poetry and performance are two separate entities, because "the poem itself is not to be identified with any performance of it or with any subclass of performance …" (Wimsatt & Beardsley, 1959: 193).

There are certain principles (a set of rules) in Northern Sotho that govern the so-called structured verse-form, and it is only by arranging language materials according to these principles that we can distinguish between poetry and prose, that is, between the verse-form and the non-verse-form. These language materials guarantee the individuality of the organised verse-form of a poem in a specific language.

Northern Sotho is one of the eleven official languages in South Africa. It is a language spoken principally in three of the provinces: Northern Province, Gauteng and Mpumalanga. Some Northern Sotho speakers are dispersed in adjoining areas as well as in the urban areas of the provinces of North-west, Northern Cape and the Free State. According to recent statistics there are an estimated 3.7 million Northern Sotho-speaking people in the Republic of South Africa (Census in Brief, 1996).

Northern Sotho is a member of the Sotho language family group. The Sotho division is thus classified principally on linguistic grounds evidenced in the particular type of "Bantu" language features seen among Sotho people. This classification is also, on ethnic grounds, valid as a collective term,. There are a number of cultural distinctions or peculiarities which set the Sotho as a group apart from other Southern Bantu (Mönnig, 1988:11). The word Sotho is derived from the words *batho ba baso* or *Basotho,* meaning black/dark people (Van Warmelo, 1955:7). Ziervogel (1969:185) classifies Northern Sotho into five sub-groups, including dialects: south-central (Kopa, Ndebele-Sotho, Molepo, Mothiba, Mothapo and Makgoba), central (Pedi, Kone, Tau, Roka and Moletlane), north-west (Hananwa, Tlokwa, Matlala, Moletši and Mamabolo), north-east (Lobedu, Phalaborwa, Khaga and Dzwabo) and east-Sotho sub-groups (Pulana and Kutswe).

Northern Sotho poetry has, according to Groenewald (1988:58), its origin in the oral tradition. At a later stage compilation of these collections appeared in written form – although some traditional genres have not been recorded fully, such as the poetry of the initiation ceremony. The best compilations are the collections of Northern Sotho traditional praise poems. The first of these collections, *Kxomo 'a thswa,* was compiled by D.M. Phala and it was published in 1935 (Mojalefa, 1995:4).

The verse-form of the praise poem chosen for discussion in this article will indicate the way in which materials are organised according to the accepted, structured verse-form principles of Northern Sotho traditional oral poetry. This article was prepared in order to show that verse-form does not depend on performance alone. When performing his poetic work the composer of a traditional oral praise song knows none of the lines, parts or stanzas of his intended creation. For him, the praise is a whole (in most poems); there are no pauses during the performance of the praise song. The longer the reciter continues without breathing, the more effective his delivery becomes – depending on his performance. Usually this happens as the text is "performed in a context in which it did not originate" because this process is discernible mainly from the "theme(s)" that the poet uses (Groenewald, 1998:1). Here is an example (my own recording):

> *Ke Mogale 'a Mogale*
> *Mogale 'a meets*
> *Mogale 'a marumo*
> *Mogale 'a go fata a fatafata*
> *A fatela pele*
> *Morago a tšhaba go gadima*
> *Mefato ya dikoma tša batho go swa.*
>
> (I am Mogale of Mogale
> Mogale of water
> Mogale of assegais
> Mogale who is digging and digging
> Digging, and digging on and on
> He is afraid to look back
> The initiation classrooms of people to burn down)

The modern approach of considering the number of syllables per line, whether accented or unaccented, or, according to Brooks and Warren (1976:496) considering the relation between accented and unaccented syllables (as discussed purely in Western poetic criticism), has no place in analysing Northern Sotho traditional initiation poetry.

This article focuses on the oral poetry of the initiation ceremony, the forgotten traditional lore that has not yet been recorded in detail. From this broad field one example is discussed to show the way in which Northern Sotho oral poetry is organised in verse-form, and, in doing this, to stress that the arranged pattern of oral Northern Sotho initiation poetry is determined by performance, and also by symmetrical boundaries and other techniques.

2. Performance

Wellek and Warren (1956:145) succinctly outline inquiry into the process of performance as follows:

> Even if we hear a recitation which we acknowledge to be excellent or perfect we cannot preclude the possibility that somebody else, or even the same reciter at another time, may give a very different rendering which would bring out elements of the poem equally well …

Wellek and Warren show that the poem can exist outside its vocal performance, and that the vocal performance contains many elements which must be considered as not included in the poem. Furthermore, they state that in some literary works of art, more especially poetic work, the vocal aspect of poetry may be an important factor of the general structure. This discussion is taken further by Wimsatt and Beardsley (1959:193) who indicate that "A poem, as verbal artifact or complex linguistic entity, is, to be sure, actualized or realized in particular performance of it – in being read silently or aloud".

Performance in this article will be discussed in relation to Northern Sotho traditional oral initiation poetry.

The male initiation session

The figure of reference is the *moditi* (teacher) who constantly uses figurative language when he teaches initiates in order not to divulge initiation secrets at this first stage of the initiation. Among other things, specific initiation compositions are taught. These initiation compositions may be sung, chanted and recited in one performance. The following is an example of such a composition. The composition is first chanted and then recited as follows (an own recording):

> *Tšhukudu ya lešoka,*
> *E hlabile kota,*
> *Naka ko šalela;*
> *Khulwana ya re ko tšwa.*
> *Banna re gane,*
> *Ra re ga se khulwana,*
> *Ke malakapetla.*
>
> (Rhinoceros of the wilderness,
> Pierced a dry piece of wood.
> Its horn got stuck;
> A reddish substance came out.
> We men refused

> And said 'it is not a reddish substance,
> It is blood'.)

This composition can be sung in solfa-notation, a traditional way of notating rhythmic and melodic sound by the alphabet and grammar of music (Gruber, 1973:1), as indicated in the following:

```
s  s  s  s  s  s ------.f  m  r ------d  d  d ------ d.         d  m  d  m  m -
Tšhukudu ya lešo------ka e hla------bi--le  ko------ta         E hla--bi--le  ko-
```

```
                                                   m  l ------s  s  s ------m
                                                   E  hla-----bi--le  ko-----ta
```

```
-f  m  r ------d  d  d ------ d.         d  m  d  m  m------f  m  r------d  d  d-
ta na-ka        ko ša-le------la         Na-ka ko  ša--le-------la ma-di    a  re  ko
```

```
                    m  l ------s    s    s ------ m
                    Naka        ko ša-le-------la
```

```
-d.                 d  m  d  m  m------f  m  r------d  d  d------d.
tšwa                Ma-di  a  re   ko    tšwa ba-n------na re ga-----ne
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```
m  l------s  s  s------m
Ma-di     a  re  ko    tšwa
```

```
                    d  m  d  m  m------f  m  r------d  d  d------d.
                    Ba-n--na re ga-------ne ra re  ga  se   ma------di
```

```
m  l------s  s  s------m
Ba-n-----na re ga-----ne
```

```
                    d  m  d  m  m------f  m  r------d  d  d------d.
                    Ra  re  ga se   ma----di ke  ma----la--ka-pe---tla
```

```
m  l------s  s  s------m
Ra re     ga se na ----di
```

At the outset the leader sings the first line and is then followed by the group in chorus. The singing takes place in order to stimulate memorisation and the teaching of good moral principles. In this article we consider the vocal aspect of poetry (performance) as one component of poetry. This means that a performance is an event, but the poem itself must be some kind of lasting object. The reading of a poem does not imply that it is a finally structured poem, because the poet may structure his/her performance to suit the poem.

This article also investigates the phenomenon that even when the singer/chanter/reciter employs singing/chanting/reciting in his artistic endeavour, he, without being aware of it, respects the rules of language governing the verse-form of his work of art. The definition of the structure and verse-form of a traditional poem/song will be discussed in the next part of the article. This discussion will refer to the song/praise quoted above.

3.   The verse-form (of oral Northern Sotho traditional songs/ poems)

De Groot (1946:19-20), Shipley (1972:34), Abrams (1981:102) and Hymes (in Sebeok, 1960:145) describe metre as a pattern that builds up balanced unity. According to Groenewald (1993:34), Northern Sotho metre differs from Western metre regarding the issue of equation. For instance, rhyme was not initially used as a means of defining metre, and even in modern written poetry, rhyme does not figure prominently in performance. In this article, the term "verse-form" is preferred to "metre".

What is important, however, as far as Northern Sotho verse-form is concerned, is the *arrangement* of the elements of poetic language, such as the sounds of the language, the tones that control syllabi, and the phonemes that determine rhythm, as well as the words, word stems and phrases. Furthermore, Saporta (in Sebeok, 1960:237) describes these elements of language as "recurrent grammatical features", while Damane and Sanders (1974:173-174) speak of a "parallelism through the repetition of ideas by synonyms". Jacobson (1960:358) sums up the argument of these theorists by stating that:

> Equivalence is promoted to the constitutive device of the sequence. In poetry one syllable is equalized with any other syllable of the same sequence; '(if)' word stress is assumed to equal word stress, as unstress equals unstress; prosodic long is matched with long, and short with short; word boundary equals word boundary, no boundary equals no boundary; syntactic pause equals syntactic pause, no pause equals no pause. Syllables are converted into units of measure, and so are morae or stresses.

Let us investigate the details of the verse-form of Northern Sotho as indicated in the song/poem above. We can divide this song/poem into two main parts: (a) the statement, and (b) the analogy/commentary to show that one component of Northern Sotho traditional oral initiation poetry is derived from its verse-form.

3.1 The statement

The first part of the song/poem may be considered as the statement:

> *Tšhukudu ya lešoka,* (Rhinoceros of the wilderness,)
> *E hlabile kota.* (Pierced a dry piece of wood.)
> *Naka ko šalela;* (Its horn got stuck;)
> *Khulwana ya re ko tšwa.* (A reddish substance came out.)

In this part the singer/poet reports on a rhinoceros of the wilderness: where it lives, what it does and what happens to its horn after it has pierced the dry wood. One can conclude that this statement explains what will happen after a rhinoceros has pierced a piece of dry wood. The answer is plain, its horn will get stuck in the wood.

In this cursory investigation it was indicated that the first part of this poem/song (the statement) consists of two verse-form lines which can be further sub-divided into two parts, the introduction and body. The introductory part is found in the first two segments of the statement: *Tšhukudu ya lešoka,/ E hlabile kota,/*(see above translation).

These first two segments form the first verse of the poem/song. The remaining two segments, *Naka ko šalela,/Khulwana ya re ko tšwa./*(see above translation) which also form another verse, constitute the body of the statement. The segments, as well as the verse boundaries, are linguistic boundaries that the oral performer uses to create rhythmic and aesthetic effects. The first one is a dividing boundary; the second one is a final boundary.

3.2 Analogy/commentary

The following is considered to be the second part of the song/poem and is called the analogy or commentary:

> *Banna re gane,* (We men refused)
> *Ra re ga se khulwana,* (And we said 'it is not a reddish substance',)
> *Ke malakapetla.* ('It is blood'.)

This section is referred to as the analogy because it explains what the men say about the blood that gushes from the rhinoceros' horn.

This second part of the poem/song can also be sub-divided, this time into three parts: (a) the introduction, (b) the body, and (c) the conclusion. The introductory part is formed by the first line of the analogy/commentary: *Banna re gane,* (We men refused,)

The body is then constituted by the second line of the analogy: *Ra re ga se khulwana,* (And said "it is not reddish substance".)

The last line is the conclusion: *Ke malakapetla.* ("It is blood".)

There are natural or linguistic boundaries which determine the division of the above-mentioned categories (the statement and the analogy/ commentary, as well as the finer sub-divisions). When analysing the verse-form of the above song/poem, we notice that there are *summits* at which pauses naturally occur in the lines. These natural pauses divide these lines into seven boundaries, which can be called the five division boundaries or caesura, and the two final or verse boundaries:

> *Tšhukudu ya lešoka (,) /*
> *E hlabile kota (,) /*
> *Naka ko šalela (;) /*
> *Khulwana ya re ko tšwa (.) //*
> *Banna re gane (,) /*
> *Ra re ga se khulwana(,) /*
> *Ke malakapetla (.) //*

The (/) stands for a shorter pause, the dividing boundary, while the (//) represents a longer pause or the end of a line. These pauses are linguistically determined, that is, they mark the boundaries of a sentence or a phrase. As stated above, this poem/song has two parts (the statement and the analogy). It is thus clear that the first part (the state-ment) consists of *four* segments, while the last part (the analogy) consists of *three* segments.

A comparison of these two parts will indicate how an equation is established. The first part (the statement) consists of an arranged pattern of rhythmical summits which corresponds with its syllabic pattern. It can best be illustrated as follows:

Tšhuku:du ya lešo:ka	=	(2 summits	=	7 syllables)
E hlabi:le ko:ta	=	(2 summits	=	6 syllables)
Na:ka ko: šale:la	=	(3 summits	=	6 syllables)
Khulwa:na ya: re ko: tšwa	=	(3 summits	=	7 syllables)

Again, it is obvious that the first and last segments consist of an equal number of syllables. This means that the first and the fourth lines frame the second and third lines. As for the rhythmical summits, it becomes evident that the first and second lines have a rhythmical pattern, and the same applies to the third and the fourth lines. The first and the second

lines thus consist of two rhythmical summits, while the third and the fourth lines comprise three rhythmical summits.

If the second part of the poem/song (the analogy/commentary) is studied the summits and syllables illustrate the following pattern:

Ban:na re ga:ne	(2 summits =	6 syllables)
Ra: re ga: se khulwa:na	(3 summits =	7 syllables)
Ke: malakape:tla	(2 summits =	6 syllables)

The analogy/commentary of this poem/song comprises of three segments, each of different rhythm and length. Their structure also forms a pattern, that is, the first segments show a particular rhythmic pattern.

The poem's rhythmic pattern can thus be summarised as follows:

seven different boundaries = (/) and (//), with five division boundaries = (/), and two final verse boundaries = (//)

This means that

stanza 1	=	2 x 2 x 3 x 3 summits	= 7 x 6 x 6 x 7 syllables
stanza 2	=	2 x 3 x 2 summits	= 6 x 7 x 6 syllables

3.3 The function of the caesura

Furthermore, when the two parts (the statement and the analogy/ commentary) are scrutinised very closely it is discovered that certain functions are related to the caesura. These functions mark the symmetrical boundaries of the segments, divide the segments and are placed at the end of the statement and the analogy/commentary of the poem/song. The functions of the ceasura are thus to unite the segments, demarcate them and to distance them from each other.

If the statements *naka* (horn) and *khulwana* (a reddish substance) in **Naka ko** *šalela;/***Khulwana** *ya re* **ko** *tšwa/* are compared with each other; we notice that the word *ko* is echoed in the third and fourth lines. In the analogy *Banna re gane,/Ra re* **ga se** *khulwana;/* **Ke** *malakapetla/* a contrast is shown by *ga se* and *ke,* as highlighted above. This contrast ties the body and the conclusion of the analogy/commentary together.

Looking at the whole poem/song, at both statement and analogy, the repetition of *khulwana* and *ya/ra re* in lines four and six forms a symmetrical pattern.

This symmetry strengthens both parts of the song/poem (statement and analogy) as it turns them into one bonded unit. A parallelism as brought about by the repetition of ideas and using synonyms also adds to this. This has been effected by the singer/poet in lines six and seven: *Ra re ga se **khulwana,**/Ke **malakapetla.***

The two words, *khulwana* (a reddish substance) and *malakapetla* (blood) are nearly synonymous. These synonyms are used to emphasise the symmetrical unit of the analogy of the poem/song. When Northern Sotho verse-form is scrutinised, two verse-form rules, namely, dividing and symmetrical rules are observed. Furthermore, verse-form in most traditional oral praises, more especially, in traditional oral initiation poems such as *Tšhukudu ya lešoka,* is not free because it is obligatory.

4. Conclusion

This article centres in the fact that a fairly simple poem, when examined more closely seems to contain more complexities. Although Northern Sotho traditional poems usually are arranged in verse-form, they are arranged slightly differently from the way in which Western metre is usually organised. We have seen this by investigating the verse-form of a traditional Northern Sotho male initiation poem/song. Furthermore, it has been observed that the meaning of initiation poems is complex; therefore they should be analysed with great care. The rhinoceros horn, for example, implies much more than the fact that the rhinoceros storms at a tree. It can be deduced that the Northern Sotho traditional poem cannot be defined by or in its performance alone, but clearly by planned devices and procedures in verse-form, often overlooked because the traditional poem/song is not a product of a written text that can be conveniently studied in detail. Therefore, the main point of this article is to highlight the fact that Northern Sotho oral traditional texts (initiation poems) derive from both performance and verse-form, that is, the symmetrical boundaries and other poetic techniques determine the verse-form of the initiation poems.

In conclusion it can be stated that the linguistic resources in oral traditional praises perform two important functions, that is that they are there to be enjoyed for their own sake (Groenewald, 1998:9), and that they are there to make discourse discontinuous, thus "making them into coherent, effective, and memorable texts" (Bauman & Briggs, 1990: 73-4).

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