

# **Inaugural address**

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**“Depiction of Johannes Mokgwadi’s divinatory poems”**

**3 August 2010**

Senate Hall, Main Campus,  
University of Pretoria

### **Summary of the inaugural address**

Although praise poetry by black South Africans has received some critical attention, there are still some researchers who find it difficult to understand the structure of this poetic form. They assume that every poem has to have a structure similar to that of poetry written in one of the languages of the West, such as English, and find the absence of such structure in praise poetry worrying. With regard to, for example, modern Sepedi poetry they further say that it is no longer oral, but rather written, and so should have more in common with Western poetry. However, this inaugural address argued the opposite view, namely that traditional oral and modern written Sepedi poetry are similar in many respects to each other and to Western modes (especially where the Western mode in question is that of oral Anglo-Saxon poetry), differing only in content.

Comparable to Anglo-Saxon alliterative verse, African oral poetry is largely divorced from meter, where meter is defined in terms of the recurrence of stressed and unstressed syllables. African languages in general, and poetry in the African languages in particular, are not characterized by stress, but rather by aspects such as tone, length, patterns of repetition, and unusual grammar.

**Titel:** Die uitbeelding van Johannes Mokgwadi se waarseggingsverse

### **Opsomming**

Alhoewel prysgedigte deur swart Suid-Afrikaners reeds kritiese aandag ontvang, is daar steeds sommige navorsers wat dit moeilik vind om die struktuur van hierdie digvorm te verstaan. Hulle aanvaar sonder meer dat elke gedig 'n struktuur moet hê wat soortgelyk is aan poësie wat in 'n Westerse taal soos Engels geskryf is en vind die afwesigheid van sodanige struktuur in prysgedigte problematies. Ten opsigte van byvoorbeeld moderne Sepedi-poësie reken hulle verder dat dit nie meer gesproke is nie maar eerder geskrewe is en derhalwe meer gemeen behoort te hê met Westerse poësie. Hierdie intreerede stel egter die teenoorgestelde beskouing, naamlik dat tradisionele gesproke en moderne geskrewe Sepedi-poësie in baie opsigte soortgelyk is aan mekaar en ook aan Westerse modusse (veral waar die betrokke Westerse modus gesproke Anglo-Saksiese poësie is), en slegs inhoudelik verskil.

In vergelyking met Anglo-Saksiese allitererende verse is gesproke Afrikataal-poësie grootliks onafhanklik van metrum, waar metrum gedefinieer word in terme van die herhaling van beklemtoonde en onbeklemtoonde sillabes. Afrikatale in die algemeen en Afrikataal-poësie in die besonder word nie deur klem gekenmerk nie maar eerder deur aspekte soos toon, lengte, herhalingspatrone en ongewone grammatika.

## Introduction

*Although praise poetry by black South Africans has received some critical attention, there are still some researchers who find it difficult to understand the structure of this poetic form. Opland (1983:159), for example, assumes that every poem has to have a structure similar to that of poetry written in one of the languages of the West, such as English, and finds the absence of such structure in praise poetry worrying. The same criticism raised by Opland, writing on isiXhosa oral poetry, is also voiced by some critics (e.g. Rycroft, 1960) with regard to modern Sepedi (African) poetry, saying that it is no longer oral, but rather written, and so should have more in common with Western poetry. However, Groenewald (1993:12–31) states the opposite view, namely that traditional oral and modern written Sepedi poetry are similar in many respects to each other and to Western modes (especially where the Western mode in question is that of oral Anglo-Saxon poetry), differing only in content, as this inaugural address attempts to show.*

Comparable to Anglo-Saxon alliterative verse, African oral poetry is largely divorced from meter, where meter is defined in terms of the recurrence of stressed and unstressed syllables. African languages in general, and poetry in the African languages in particular, are not characterized by stress, but rather by aspects such as tone, length, patterns of repetition, and unusual grammar (Shipley, 1972:102).

The poems of Johannes Mokgwadi have been selected to explore the variety of verse forms in Sepedi poetry of divination. In brief, Johannes Mokgwadi is known as a harp-player, lyricist, composer and arranger of traditional songs. Many of his lyrics were recorded on compact discs. He is also renowned for his divinatory poetry. So far, he is the only divinatory poet who rendered the shortest divinatory poems in Sepedi oral works.

During the course of the discussion the role of the diviner as poet will also be explored in order to elucidate the central iconography. During the examination of a patient, communication between the diviner and his/her ancestors or the patient's ancestors is established through a form of praise poetry, known as poetry of divination. During this process different divinatory bones play a pivotal role in the creation of a particular 'prayer', which takes the form of a recitation.

## Verse forms

In poetry, whether Western or African, verse design underlies the form of any single line of verse (or single verse instance, using poetical terminology). This determines the invariant features of the verse instances and sets up the limits of variations (Jakobson in Sebeok, 1960:373). The completed literary composition does not betray many signs of the effort that went into its creation. This rounded-off composition might be ascribed to an organic structure, that is, to a structure which appears to be entirely natural and spontaneous, the elements composing it all fused together into one natural and harmonious whole. These elements combine to communicate the thoughts and feelings that lie behind the words (Heese & Lawton, 1983:11).

There is a rhythm in the lines of a poem, just as there is a rhythm of the poem as a whole. This becomes clearer where the poem is written in stanzas, and groups of lines recur in the same pattern. Form does not only consist of rhythmic patterns, such as stanzas; there may be an observable pattern of symbols, or a specific language structure (Simpson, 1972:5). Most traditional African poems, however, are not divided into stanzas, but there are quite a number of different verse forms in use in Sepedi poetry such as *Di wele mohlakola* (Mashilo, Mohlamonyane & Maripane, 1998:86). The composer of traditional praise poems knows no parts, stanzas or lines

in his composition. In Brooks and Warren's (1976:525) examination of stanzaic forms in English poetry they observe that:

... any given type of stanza must be regarded as an instrument at the poet's disposal and not as a thing important in itself.

Furthermore, they argue that the same creation may be employed for different purposes. Therefore, any given type of verse is used in conjunction with many other poetic factors. A reader should, therefore, be wary of attributing special effects to special verse forms. Considering only stanzaic form in isolation from other poetic elements may lead to the most general of conclusions. The above comment is applicable to Sepedi divinatory composition of poetic art.

Form designs in the poetry of divinatory bones are, to a large extent, bound up with what they were intended for, as well as the manner in which they were recited. Divinatory poems are definitely intended for the ear (listening) and not the eye (reading), for communication with ancestors and not for performance before an audience in public gatherings. For this reason, the conveyance of thought and action, embellished in various stylistic ways, is uppermost because such thoughts and actions are conveyed in the form of prayer rather than entertainment.

Cultural verse designs in Sepedi poetry of divinatory bones will be discussed under the following subheadings as articulated by Groenewald (1993):

- Metrical compositions
- Long-measure verse
- Long-measure repetition verse
- Divinatory poems with linked hemistichs
- Divinatory poems with repeated segments
- Long-measure triplet verse
- Verses of four, five or more hemistichs

In the discussion of cultural verse forms only a few examples of divinatory compositions (one poem per category) are cited.

### **Metrical composition**

Hymes (in Sebeok, 1960:125) and de Groot (1946:19-20) discuss meter as a balanced unified build-up pattern. Thus, meter may be described as a repetitive and symmetrical pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables on which a poem may be based (Heese & Lawton, 1983:13). According to Groenewald (1993:34), Sepedi meter differs from the above definitions, more especially with regard to the issue of equation (the balance of the number of rhythmical summits and syllables per hemistich). For instance, rhyme has not been formally used as the way of defining Sepedi meter. What matters is the arrangement of the elements of the poetic language, such as the sounds of the language, the tone that controls syllables, and the phoneme that determines rhythm, including word stem and phrase. Accordingly, this inaugural address examines Sepedi meter as discussed by Groenewald, emphasizing that the issue of equation is not considered in this type of arrangement.

### **The arrangement of the elements of the poetic language and the division of the metrical line into hemistichs**

The arrangement of the elements of the poetic language and the division of the metrical line(s) into hemistichs (discussed as equal metrical units/parts by Brown, 1966:137) will be argued separately to illustrate that this type of arrangement occurs often in the poetry of traditional healers (*dingaka*). However, it cannot be disputed

that it is the characteristic metrical mould of some of the Sepedi forms of divinatory poems.

The poems which are quoted are accompanied by literal translations. **XX**

What follows is an example of the poetry accompanying the art of divination showing the specific arrangement of the elements of the Sepedi language and the division of the metrical lines into hemistichs. Johannes Mokgwadi (sound recording, 1999) recites *Selomi*<sup>1</sup> as follows:

- 1 *Mohlakola wo mogolo wa ntikodiko /*
- 2 *Wa nthetelego 'a mahlaku /*
- 3 *Le ora ka noši / metse le phuthela /*
- 4 *Balata go Mosehla o se na nabo //*

The aim is not to discuss the whole poem, but only to indicate the specific arrangement of the poetic elements.

**XX** In line 3, there is a summit at which the pause naturally occurs in the middle of the line:

- 3 *Le ora ka noši / metse le phuthela /*

Even in the English translation a natural pause divides this line into two equal parts (hemistichs). The boundary indicated by the slash (/) in line 3 above can be called a division boundary or caesura.

To show these two hemistichs clearly, the line can be restructured as follows: **XX**

*Le ora ka noši*  
and  
*metse le phuthela*

This line is made up of an arranged pattern of rhythmical summits that goes hand-in-hand with its syllabic pattern. This is illustrated as follows: **XX**

*Le o:ra ka no:ši* = 2 summits = 6 syllables  
*Me:tse le phuthe:la* = 2 summits = 6 syllables

It will be noticed that the number of rhythmical summits and syllables are equal, that is, there are two summits and six syllables per hemistich. This type of the poetic language arrangement occurs often in the poetry of traditional healers (*dingaka*).

### Short and long lines in a verse

The following poem, *Sehloko*, is recited by Johannes Mokgwadi (sound recording, 1999) in his divinatory practice: **XX**

*Sehloko ke motho, sehloko mmele a motho,*  
*Sehloko Mmirwa ke Tlou<sup>2</sup>*  
*Ge e le go hlabja ka kotse o hlabilwe,*

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<sup>1</sup> Even if *selomi* (carved bull's hoof: male) is not mentioned in this divinatory poem by name, it is an elision, because usually divining bones are addressed in divinatory poetry.

<sup>2</sup> Tlou (adult male and female and child) is mentioned in this divinatory poem by name, because usually divining bones are addressed in divinatory poetry.

*Mootlwa o ile wa hlaba Barolong,  
Babirwa ba kwa bose,  
Ba re:  
Agee, Sehlako o hlabilwe!  
Segela mogolo kwekwetla, gomme a kgopše a we nayo.*

Tonal rhymes will not be discussed in this poem. There are eight metrical lines in this verse. This strophe is structured in such a way that it consists of some short lines, for example: **XX**

*Sehlako Mmirwa ke Tlou,  
Babirwa ba kwa bose,  
Ba re:*

and some long lines, such as:

*Sehlako ke motho, sehlako mmele a motho,  
Ge e le go hlabja ka kotse o hlabilwe,  
Segela mogolo kwekwetla, gomme a kgopše a we nayo.*

These metrical lines indicate the difference of rhythm employed by the poet. Divinatory poems are usually structured in such a way that they consist of some short and long lines to indicate different tempos employed in such metrical lines.

### **Long-measure verse**

Long-measure verse is also the characteristic metrical mould of some of the Sepedi forms of divinatory poems. They consist of a single metrical line or strophe divided medially by a natural pause or 'caesura', which divides the strophe into two equal hemistichs.

For instance, in his divination, Johannes Mokgwadi (sound recording, 1999) recites *Moremogolo*<sup>3</sup> as follows: **XX**

*More wo mogolo wa mafala! /  
Ke fadile, / la mopo ke boa nalo.*

The above two lines are divided by a natural pause (caesura) indicated by a slash (/) for a rest at the end of the first line to form a strophe (single metrical line). Even though the number of syllables and symmetrical summits are not equal in this strophe, this does not disqualify the existence of the meter of this poem. Metrical variants such as parallelism (a line having a relation with another) are also a determining factor. Furthermore, it can be observed that the above two lines do not rhyme as would be expected of this type of poem in Western-style poetry. Instead, they are joined together to form a strong unit similar to a couplet as is displayed by *fadile* to the left in the second line. The latter example is the exact repetition/linking of a word (phrase) which is generally known as exact parallelism.

### **Long-measure repetition verse**

According to Harries (1956:5), there is a device known to Persian poets as *mukarrar*, that is, the repetition or so-called 'echo' of a word or part of a word after the first hemistich. Swahili poets adopted this technique in quatrain verses. This technique is

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<sup>3</sup> *Moremogolo* (more wo mogolo) (*carved cow's hoof: female*) is mentioned by name in this divinatory poem, because as usual divining bones are addressed in divinatory poetry.

also evident in Sepedi divinatory poems. An interesting example of such a poem, recited by Johannes Mokgwadi (sound recording, 1999) is *Legwame*: **XX**

*Legwame la hlogo ye tšhweu / hlogo ye tšhweu e rwala diala;  
Ga go sa tle dira / go tla tla tšie;  
Ke lona moririmošweu / moririmošweu lehumo;  
Ee, le ile bošweu / le ile bošweu la re boso.*

Note the 'echo' (linking) of a word (which can also be referred to as parallelism) after the first hemistich as structured in the second and third lines of the poem under discussion:

*Ga go sa **tle** dira / go tla tla tšie;  
Ke lona **moririmošweu** / moririmošweu lehumo;*

The words in bold in both hemistichs of each line, that is, *tle* and *moririmošweu*, are repeated words in these two lines and represent long-measure repetition verse. Even if the words *tla/tle* in:

*Ga go sa tle dira / go tla tla tšie;*

were not repeated immediately after being used for the first time, as can be expected of the arrangement of long-measure 'echo' verse, this type of arrangement can be considered a structured form of long-measure repetition verse, because the repeated word *tla(e)* is written toward the end of the first hemistich and then repeated in the middle of the second hemistich. The assumption is that the *tle* in the first hemistich and the *tla* in the second hemistich also represent long-measure repetition verse as they are arranged in such a way that they are not far from each other in the line. In other words, they are placed fairly close to each other in the middle of the metrical line.

There is, moreover, an 'echo' of a phrase after the first hemistich:

*Legwame la hlogo ye tšhweu / hlogo ye tšhweu e rwala diala;  
Ee, le ile bošweu / le ile bošweu la re boso.*

Both phrases:

*hlogo ye tšhweu  
and  
le ile bošweu*

would also have been considered long-measure 'echo' verse by the Persian poets, although Harries (1956:5) does not discuss this type of arrangement under long-measure repetition verse. One can insist on including this arrangement under this type of verse, because the repetition of a word or part of a word after the first hemistich does not differ from the 'echo' of a phrase after the first hemistich. The repeated syntactic units as shown above play an important role in linking the essential ideas of the poem.

### **Divinatory poems with linked hemistichs**

*Parallelism* can be described as linguistic similarities that may be observed between certain metrical lines: '... a certain similarity between two parts or members of a sentence whose words (phrases) correspond to one another' (Guma, 1967:159). It is the construction of a sentence using repeated syntactic units. Poems in which successive verses are linked together by the repetition in each successive verse of a

terminal measure of the preceding verse are popular in Sepedi divinatory poetry. The following poem, *Thakadu*, is an example of this type: **XX**

*Thakadu a ntopa, a ntopa,  
Motse ka lopa ke badimo,  
Badimo batho ba kopi 'a morara' Senamela,  
**Senamela senyabuhla senyaphokeng.***

The words *badimo* and *Senamela* can be ascribed to parallelism which may be further described as (exact) left linking, because they link metrical lines to the left. This syntactic device was adopted by Sepedi divinatory poets and bears out the notion that metrical lines are like strings of pearls in a necklace as shown above in the poem. The poet uses this strategy to indicate how the ancestors (*badimo*) play a prominent role in the spiritual lives of the Bapedi (*Senamela*).

### **Divinatory poems with repeated segments**

In this inaugural address, poems in which one or more strophes or the whole or part of a word is repeated within each verse, are termed *directomosehlwana* (poems with repeated segments or parallelism). This technique takes on several structural forms, which are regarded as a type of 'poetic acrobatics' (Harries, 1956:8) employed by the poet to indicate his/her skill in designing strophes in a poem. A hemistich may be repeated either simply or in reverse. Johannes Mokgwadi (sound recording, 1999) employs this technique in his divinatory poems, as can be seen in the poem *Lešata ke la bomogolodi* that follows: **XX**

***Ke mabje a lešata** / ke lešagašaga la molapo,  
Lešata ke la mogodi 'a tšie / šatana la bomogolodi,  
Sa lešata ga se sa lešata / **sa lerole ke sa lerole,**  
**Sa lerole ke sa lerole** / legoa go goa notwane,  
Ga le na legoa kudu / go hwa kgoši,  
Kgoši e hwa ka mabje a lerole / **lešata ke la mabje.***

The hemistich, which is repeated, simply is *sa lerole ke sa lerole*; and the hemistich *lešata ke la mabje* from the first line is repeated in reverse in the last line of the poem. Here again, the poet employs a similar strategy/technique to show his/her skill in designing the strophe in this poem to highlight the importance of divination in the lives of the Bapedi.

### **Long-measure triplet verse**

Long-measure triplet verse forms may be found in Sepedi divinatory poems. What is usually common is that they lack rhyming hemistichs. It is not surprising that rhyme is missing in this form, because rhyme is one of the devices that are rarely used in Sepedi traditional poetry. The following poem, *Makgolela*, is an example of form without rhyme (Johannes Mokgwadi, sound recording, 1999): **XX**

*Ke lekgolela la seša / sekgopša sa dingaka,  
Ge ke kgopilwe / ke wela ntlong,  
Ga ke wele ntle / ke se mošemanyana.*

Mokgwadi accepts that rhyme is one of the devices that are rarely used in Sepedi divinatory poetry. As a result, he emphasizes that divinatory poems are not determined by rhyme at all.



### **Verses of four, five or more hemistichs**

Within the quatrain, a single verse of a Sepedi divinary poem usually consists of two lines. A verse of four hemistichs is written either as a single metrical line or as two metrical lines. Rhyming is not evident in this form. For this inaugural address, only two poems having different lines recited by Johannes Mokgwadi (sound recording, 1999) are quoted: **XX**

#### ***Tibula***

- (a) *Ke Tibula 'a pitsi 'a Mogwadi,  
Ba dimogile Bangwaketse/;  
Batho ba Mokubela' Moraka,  
Ke bona ba sehlogo sa ngaka//.*

#### ***Legwame***

- (b) *Legwame le lemerwalo,  
Le lemerwalo ya boTlapo/,  
E ladiše Tlapo nageng/,  
Gomme Tlapšane a goroga  
Ka merwalo ye megolo ya boTlapo//.*

On the one hand, poem (a) is divided into two metrical lines: that is, metrical line one is divided as follows: **XX**

*Ke Tibula 'a pitsi 'a Mogwadi,  
Ba dimogile Bangwaketse/;*

and metrical line two is dented as follows:

*Batho ba Mokubela' Moraka,  
Ke bona ba sehlogo sa ngaka//.*

By contrast, poem (b) is structured differently from poem (a) in that metrical line one is recited as follows: **XX**

*Legwame le lemerwalo,  
Le lemerwalo ya boTlapo/,*

while metrical line two is recited as follows:

*E ladiše Tlapo nageng/,*

and the final metrical line (three) is structured as follows:

*Gomme Tlapšane a goroga  
Ka merwalo ye megolo ya boTlapo//.*

Thus, poem (b) comprises three hemistichs of different length, while poem (a) comprises two equal hemistichs. It has been noticed that most Sepedi divinary poems are structured in such a way that they consist of only one verse or stanza, although there are some which are divided into more verses.

### **In conclusion**

Most Sepedi traditional divinary poems do not consist of verses or stanzas. Form designs of poetry of the divinary bones are to a large extent bound up with what

they were intended for (i.e. for communication with ancestors and not for performance before an audience in public gatherings), as well as the manner in which they were recited. For this reason, the conveyance of thought and action, embellished in various stylistic ways, is uppermost. Accordingly, such thoughts and actions are conveyed in the form of prayer rather than entertainment.

The diviner plays an essential role in the spiritual lives of the Bapedi. That is why his/her position in the society is highly honoured and respected and his/her influence and power are second only to a *kgošī* 'king' and his council. Consequently, the diviner, like any other traditional healer, is very important in the nation's activities. In every case, when a patient seeks spiritual and physical advice from the diviner, the diviner must consult the divining bones for the examination. Before the examination the diviner must address the question to his/her ancestors to allow him/her to examine his/her patient and then contact between himself/herself and the divining bones will be established. To establish complete communication between the diviner and his/her ancestors or the patient's ancestors, a praise poem related to a particular divination is recited in honour of the divinatory bones.

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