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The violence of Explaining Myself – The Binds of Translation

The emergence of a *revolutionary literature* in colonial and postcolonial settings, according to Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963), is the result of a development in cultural production that consists of three noticeable phases. His analysis is the voice of conscience that motivates our work at Ba re e ne re (once upon a time), a non-profit organization created to enrich the lives of the Basotho people in Lesotho by promoting increased literacy, creative writing, storytelling and artistic exchange between creatives in Lesotho, Basotho outside of Lesotho and creatives from other cultures.[1]

He writes: "In the first phase, the native intellectual gives proof that he has assimilated the culture of the occupying power. His writings correspond point by point with those of his opposite number in the mother country. His inspiration is European, and we can easily link up these works with definite trends in the literature of the mother country […]. In the second phase we find the native is disturbed; he decides to remember what he is […], but since the native is not part of his people, he only has exterior relations with his people, he is content to recall his life only. Past happenings of the bygone days of his childhood will be brought up out of the depths of his memory; old legends will be reinterpreted in the light of a borrowed aestheticism and of a conception of the world which was discovered under other skies […]. Finally, in the third phase, which is called the fighting phase, the native, after having tried to lose himself in the people and with the people, will on the contrary, shake the people. Instead of according the people's lethargy an honored place in his esteem, he turns himself into an awakener of the people; hence comes a fighting literature, a revolutionary literature, and a national literature" (Fanon 1961: 222f.).

As educators operating through creative cultural production, we genuinely believe that the process of interrogating, dissecting and alleviating colonial influence from arts education, specifically the literary arts, relies on equipping students with cognitive competencies that allow them to map the orientation of their own thinking.

The following text is inspired by our desire to trace the root causes of the problems we experience and observe in the use of the Sesotho language. In order to identify them and determine possibilities of addressing these issues through critical studies and creative interventions in our practice, we embarked on a journey through time.

I am going to tell you a story: Ba re e ne re…

WHERE IT ALL BEGAN

Our point of departure was a study of the life and legacy of the writer, educator and activist Thomas Mokopu Mofolo (1876-1948), who wrote some of the earliest novels published by an African writer in Southern Africa. After graduating from the Paris Evangelical Mission Society school with a teacher's certificate in 1898, Mofolo worked as a manuscript writer, proofreader and secretary for the Sesuto Book Depot for over a decade, while at the same time contributing regularly to the mission's newspaper *Leselinyana - The Little Light of Lesotho* (Kunene 1990).

Learning about Mofolo led us to taking a more extensive look at the history of literacy education and its ties to religious conversion in Lesotho.

BACKGROUND

The Morija Mission was established by Protestant missionaries Thomas Arbousset, Eugene Casalis and Constant Gosselin in 1833. These Frenchmen had been sent to the Kingdom of Lesotho by the Paris Evangelical Missionary Society in order to assist the London Missionary Society in bringing about what they collectively described as the "regeneration of the Negro race and its adoption into the mainstream of human progress" (Kimble 1978: 105).

In pursuit of this goal, Arbousset, Casalis and Gosselin learned to speak the Sesotho language and took on the task to develop its writing system. Before their arrival, Sesotho had been an oral language. Energetic, ambitious and eager to fulfill what the three missionaries felt was

1 Ba re e ne re Literary Arts: *www.barelitfest.com/about/*

their calling, they began translating portions of the Bible into Sesotho in 1836. They went on to establish *The Little Light of Lesotho* newspaper in 1863, after Basotho had shown a remarkable interest in the written word (Kunene 1977: 149-161).

Anecdote: They were on their way to Botswana and rerouted to Lesotho upon the invitation of the founder of the Basotho nation, King Moshoeshoe the First. His friend, a man called Adam Krotz, had told him about white evangelists and how their teachings brought peace. Exhausted by the constant battles and wars with neighboring nations and tribes, King Moshoeshoe thought he had nothing to lose by engaging with the missionaries (Khati 2015: 90f.).

WHY LITERACY? WHY WRITE?

Already armed with a propensity for storytelling, it was no surprise that Basotho took to this new form of expression and discourse. Inspired by the Basotho's enthusiasm and driven by the competition between themselves, the Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican Church, the missionaries resolved to use literary texts as tools for conversion and thus set out to transform Sesotho into a written language (Mart 2011: 190-194).

This approach was problematic in the sense that none of them was a trained linguist or grammar expert. The French missionaries based their formulation of the rules for Sesotho orthography and reading on their prior knowledge of the rules governing the French language as well as the English, which as their second language was not as much their strong suit.[2] Thus, while they encrypted the language using the English alphabet, they primarily applied rules relevant to the French language (Simango 2003: 34f.).

Furthermore, their foreign accents made it difficult for them to accurately put a language that is phonetic in nature, in writing. It was under these circumstances that Sesotho began its tumultuous journey towards self-identification and understanding among its users.

FLAWED ORIGINS

The consequences of these problematic origins become apparent a.o. in the fact that Sesotho is written in the form of disjointed syllables, that is, we use one letter to express a word, akin to French. The letters a, e, o and u for example can represent entire words in Sesotho. In the beginning there were attempts to use diacritical marks (accents) as well, which proved hard to teach and easy to forget, therefore creating inconsistencies.

The current head of the Linguistics department at the National University of Lesotho, Dr. Matlosa, revealed in an interview that the prefix *Li* comes from the phonetic representation of the letter D.[3] Being based on the logic of the phonetic alphabet, this fact is confusing for anyone used to the English alphabet. Consequently, my name should be spelled as 'Dineo', but it isn't (Matlosa, Machobane & Mokitimi: 2003).

By the time the protestant missionaries formerly opened schools, the first of which were the teacher training normal school, the industrial school and the bible school in 1868, and then later the Morija Theological School in 1887, they already had a legacy of tutoring small batches of local converts who contributed to their publications and their discourse. With increased literacy, outspoken locals raised the issue of the disharmony between how Sesotho was spoken and how it was written and some reforms took place while other rules essentially stayed the same.

Interestingly, the core activities that took place at the schools were the teaching of reading and writing, the study of the bible and instruction in the spiritual values and teachings of the Christian faith (Mothibe & Ntabeni 2002). European cultural values were emphasized, students had to adopt a biblical name, wear European clothing and practice European eating and living habits. This was also in keeping with the rules and regulations designated by the British Colonial Office in Cape Town, which Lesotho was assigned to when it became a protectorate in 1868 and then later a colony in 1884[4].

It is important to note that different factions of European missionaries in the territory - among others French, Swiss, English and German missions - deliberately coded the languages of their respective locales differently from their competitors as a way of asserting the size of their flock (Miti 2013: 53).

THE INTERTWINING OF CHURCH AND STATE

The curriculum, although implemented by the mission schools, was administered by the British authorities. In 1906 a conference was held to design a consolidated grammatical framework of Sesotho (Heugh 2016). This conference included some Basotho scholars who were strongly affiliated to the church. At the time, the churches were playing the central role in the provision of formal education, thus these scholars were indirectly forced to make some concessions to keep the peace and demonstrate their faith in the perceived superior knowledge and wisdom of their missionaries. In 1909 Eduardo Jacottet published *Grammar e nyenyane ea Sesotho* (The Small Sesotho Grammar Book), followed by a compilation of Sesotho folktales and a host of other books.

Interviewed on the grammatical and orthographical errors associated with Sesotho, Dr. Thamae - Lecturer in the Faculty of Education with a focus on Sesotho teacher training at National University of Lesotho - explained that

2 Accredited Language Services: Sesotho. (n.d.): *www.alsintl.com/resources/languages/sesotho* (retrieved April 1st 2018).

3 Matlosa, L (2018, April 19). Personal video interview.

4 Luscombe, Stephen. (n.d) Basutoland: *www.britishempire.co.uk/maproom/basutoland.htm* (retrieved April 1st 2018).

post-independence there were two other opportunities to harmonize the Sesotho language in keeping with global standards, once in 1970 and again in 1984, but progress was once again stalled by irreconcilable political differences.[5]

THE EFFECT

Due to the distorted origins of the Sesotho writing system, many Basotho struggle with reading Sesotho - and as a consequence, writing it - a fact that we observed through personal experience, surveys with teachers and students, and feedback from a focus group.[6] The rules are so confusing and burdensome that they often discourage those with interest in learning them. More often than not, people read in Sesotho only when they must, but as In a personal interview Dr. Thamae, lecturer in the Faculty of Education with a focus on Sesotho teacher training at National University of Lesotho, pointed out, the current curriculum itself does not support read-alouds and other oral exercises.[7] Apart from those with a personal motivation to learn and understand literature in Sesotho, the interest in reading and writing Sesotho often diminishes if the obligation to get grades is removed.

Dr. Phafoli, Senior Lecturer in the Department of African Languages and Literature at the National University of Lesotho, pointed out to us that the introduction of Christianity has made most people narrow-minded and self-censoring regarding the blunt nature of Sesotho.[8] He calls upon creatives and artists to use their agency and poetic license to assist in the creation and dissemination of new words. He adds that Sesotho's richness in literary devices and creative expression can be used to our advantage while the process of expanding the Sesotho vocabulary is undergoing.

The three above mentioned professors, Matlosa, Thamae and Phafoli, agree, although not bluntly, that the existing rules governing Sesotho grammar and orthography need to be treated creatively because political activity, nationalist sentiment and legislation are enduring barriers that will otherwise continue to generate stagnation.

RETURNING TO THOMAS MOFOLO

His first two books *Moeti oa Bochabela* (1907; Travellor of the East) and *Pitseng* (1910) both clearly reflect the influence of his colonial and Christian education. Their protagonists are presented as pillars of their societies because of their proximity to the church which itself propagates Christian virtues and morality. Interestingly, however, in *Pitseng* Mofolo ultimately describes formal Christianity as a debasement of love and suggests that the sacred love found through God is maintained by the unconverted (Chaka 2016). This is a crucial turning point in Mofolo's political and philosophical development.

In *Chaka* (1925), Mofolo seemingly disassociates from his colonial Christian education by writing a fictionalized account of the demise of the controversial Zulu warrior king Shaka kaSenzangakhona. Unlike his earlier works, Mofolo does not condemn what would have been perceived by Europeans as the uncivilized and tribal way of life. Through exploring the intricacies of Chaka's life with nuanced detail, Mofolo humanizes the experiences of the character and his society. This defiant narrative was considered so threatening by the colonial administration that the release of the book was delayed for 15 years, yet it went on to become his most critically acclaimed book to this day (Segeote 2015).

(Remember Fanon's quote?)

Anecdote: After he wrote Chaka, Mofolo abandoned writing and his mission work to pursue careers as a mining recruit agent and entrepreneur. Torn between leaving his home and a moral dilemma based on his identity as a Christian, he died a shadow of his former self.

BACK TO THE PRESENT

Drawing on Mofolo's work and the literature reviews we are currently still engaged in, Ba re e ne re has been developing interventions for the language curriculum to be tried both in formal and informal learning settings. We have learned that the complicated history of Sesotho orthography offers an opportunity to break the rules and wield our creative juices and tools to tell Basotho stories.

The *Ba re e ne re Short Story Anthology (2016)* was one such experiment: We invited Basotho writers to submit stories using voices they were most comfortable with and ultimately published a book with 23 short stories.

We also initiated the *Ba re Dictionary*[9], a project through which we hope to document a collection of new and old words which complement the life of a modern-day Mosotho and demonstrate the possibilities for innovation in the Sesotho language. Through the words of the *Ba re Dictionary*, we describe complex feelings and develop new terms for everyday items. For example *Lehlo*, the feeling a person has when they know they have taken the perfect photograph.

Recently we've begun a series of workshops that are facilitated in the form of an informal hang-out. During these hangouts we play word-games related to people's personal creative interests such as music, drawing, dance etc., and create opportunities for using and inventing new words.

Along with the *Ba re Dictionary* play-dates, we will also host our second *Ba re e ne re Spelling bee*[10]. Stu-

5 Thamae, C. G. (2018, 23 April). Personal video interview.

6 Maseru Working Group. (2016, October 18) Literacy as an agent for creativity - first research phase.

7 Thamae, C. G. (2018, 23 April). Personal video interview.

8 Phafoli, L. (2018, April 23). Personal video interview.

9 Ba re dictionary: *www.barelitfest.com/ba-re-dictionary/* (retrieved November 19th 2018).

10 National spelling bee 2015: *https://barelitfest.com/spelling-bees/* (retrieved November 19th 2018).

dents will be tasked with spelling out words related to their everyday lives. The curation of these words is inspired by findings that emphasize the significance of socio-cultural knowledge in literacy development which suggest that for holistic learning one must look beyond the traditional notion of a classroom. This is to say making learning an exchange between the teacher and students. Instead of teachers dictating the terms of interaction as prescribed by the teaching manual, students are put front and centre as sources of knowledge themselves based on their socially situated identities and experiences (Gee 2002).

We have also taken the liberty to incorporate lessons we have learned in our research to program activities for our annual literature festival and writer's workshops. During these events we discuss and research on questions such as: How do attendees envision the decolonization of Sesotho? How do they retain their voice in writing? What do they do to promote a passionate and critically engaged reading culture among their peers?

THE PRESENT

What we know for sure is that there is a beauty to the flawed design of our language. The conversation on harmonizing it to meet global standards is still ongoing. However, we ask ourselves, what does that conformity to global standards entail? Does it mean further subjecting ourselves to the violence of translation, does it mean inventing our own alphabet? Does it mean divorcing ourselves from an integral part of our young history and starting afresh, without the footprint left by the missionaries? Can we even do that given that Christianity has become an integral part of our society and culture? Given the complicated nature and histories of all language in general, do we own the flaws in Sesotho and innovate upon them to become regenerative and safeguard the survival of our indigenous language? Where do we place the topic of language in discussions about national sovereignty? Do we actively problematize the holes and gaps in our language's construction through discourse or do we embrace it for what it is and focus on creating content?

By asking these questions and bringing people together for creative literary conversations, we are actively wrestling with the colonial legacy of written Sesotho and once again making the language our own.

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