

# Taboos in the Upbringing of a Mosotho Child

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## Abstract

In most African societies there are expressions that are meant to caution people against behaviours and actions which are considered culturally unacceptable or dangerous to lives of people. Such actions and behaviours, regarded as taboo, are observable amongst Basotho. Taboos are the sources of peace and stability in a society. They guide human behaviour and are a symbol of identity. Without the use of these teaching aids, Basotho children's lives will be disrupted. Thus, taboos are one of the fundamental teachings of Sesotho culture. This article is intended to demonstrate how the message is communicated to Basotho young boys and girls through taboos. It further analysed them to find out what is taboo about their intended messages as well as their relevance in the upbringing of a Mosotho child. Change this sentence to: Conclusions will be drawn from the discussion.

## Introduction

Child rearing is given special attention in most African societies primarily because it should be done properly in order to mould the future of a child. It is also a communal practice in that it is the responsibility of every parent and adult. A well-nurtured Mosotho child regards not only regards the biological parents as sources To a well nurtured Mosotho child, not only biological parents count as parents, but every adult is regarded as a parent. If the child is not raised properly, he is likely to face a bleak future. Whenever a child engages in undesirable actions, people attribute the behaviour to parents' failure to nurture that child appropriately. For instance, when a teenager or a youth is ill-mannered or has committed a crime of any kind, his unacceptable behaviour is associated with poor upbringing, hence the saying, "*ngoana ke seipone sa lelapa la bo*" (A child is reflection of their family).

According to Fromkin et al (1988:279), taboo refers to acts that are forbidden or to be avoided. He adds that the tabooic nature of acts makes their reference taboo as well. That is, a person is forbidden to do something and thus forbidden to talk about it. As a result, something else will be given as a reason for forbidden actions while the real reason is avoided or the reason is not provided and remains unknown to the child. For Basotho, questioning the reasons behind the taboo is seen as blasphemous.

As a result, children grow up not knowing the reason behind some taboos and when they become parents they fail to convey these social rules that regulate or police human behaviour.

Taboos are unwritten conventions that are communicated from one generation to another by word of mouth. One learns about a taboo in one's daily life activities. One gets to know what is acceptable and unacceptable when one is permitted to act in a certain manner or outlawed. Since children have a curiosity towards forbidden acts, either punishment is meted out if one breaks the given rule or threatened in order to prohibit the engagement of unacceptable behaviours.

Because education starts at an early age, some taboos are meant to guide the childhood behaviour of children while others are meant to secure their future as men and women as per the saying, "*thupa e otolloa e sa le metsi*" (a stick is shaped while still moist). Some taboos may change at a particular age or stage of an individual's life. For instance, a girl is not allowed to eat eggs as she develops but is permitted to eat eggs at adult stage.

There are several prohibited actions that Basotho convey through the use of tabooic expressions. This article examines the expressions that prohibit certain actions and determines why such actions are prohibited. It will also look into their relevance in the upbringing of modern Basotho children. The work is divided into four sections. The first section is a collection of expressions meant to guide girls, followed by expressions that guide boys. The third section examines tabooic expressions that are not gender based and the fourth one looks at whether this way of moulding children is still relevant.

### **Tabooic expressions for girls**

Girls were raised with the intention of being future wives and mothers. Many tabooic expressions affecting them were meant to warn them against pre-marital sex and unwanted pregnancy, which were a disgrace not only to the family but to the community at large. In many African cultures when a girl married, a virginity test was performed. If she was found to have engaged in pre-marital sex, she was returned to her maiden family, and the bride price "*lobola*", would also have to be returned. In order to avoid the shame, girls were cautioned against engaging in activities that may result in pre-marital sex. Warnings against such behaviours related to food, attire and certain behaviours such as sitting posture. The following expressions serve as examples:

- *Se ke ua ja mahe hobane lehloa le tla khetheha mohla u chatang* (Do not eat eggs because it will snow on your wedding day): Eggs are very rich in protein and may cause early development which may result in pre-marital sex because a girl who shows signs of physical maturity but has not cognitively matured may be inclined to follow her bodily desires while disregarding the repercussions.

- *Se ke ua lula u kotsometse* (Do not squat): Girls used to wear *lithethana* (girls' attire made of threaded beads to resemble a mini skirt) and later on short dresses. Due to the nature of their attire (*thethana*/short dresses), they were not allowed to squat because their private parts would be exposed, especially because in the olden day there were undergarments. The view of a squatting girl was seen as enticing and teasing to boys who would then want to engage in unacceptable actions such as rape. Only boys were pressured to squat as it indicated a readiness and alert akin to future warriors.
- *Se ke ua robala le baholo ba hau (batsoali) – U tla hloba khoale* (Do not sleep in the same house/room with your elders/parents): Girls were not allowed to share a bedroom with their parents. The danger here is that a child will be exposed to lovemaking and night play. It is dangerous in that the child might hear or see what parents do and then imitate them or tell others. Sex-related matters are hidden from children.
- *Se ke ua ja likahare tsa nku* (Do not eat the sheep's offal): It is believed that sheep's offal are nutritious and may promote early development in girls resulting in engagement in pre-marital sex, just as in the case of eggs.
- *Se ke ua fihla hae letsatsi le liketse u senya litharisa* (Do not come home after sunset; you destroy family traditional security): Children who roam the streets/villages in the evening are likely to engage in criminal acts or engage in ill-mannered practices because they are on their own without adult supervision. Pre-marital sex, rape and burglary are mostly done during dark hours while elders are indoors.

Other issues that were of high significance were menstruation and childbirth. Girls, as future women, are cautioned against certain actions that may make them barren or that may bring them complications during delivery. Since adults could not talk about childbirth to girls, they used expressions that would hinder any action that might yield unbearable results. For instance, they warned against exiting the door on reverse or to turn at the exit. Although they were never told why, the fear was that when they later give birth, their children would be delivered feet first. In Basotho culture, a child that was born feet first is said to have *sebetse se sesoau*, "white liver". A ritual has to be performed for such a child, failing which he/she will encounter loss of partners through death by the time he/she gets married. If the ritual is not performed at an early stage, it can be performed at adult stage to remedy the situation.

Menstruation was kept as a woman's secret and cleanliness was recommended during this time. Girls were, therefore, cautioned to take good care of themselves during menstruation and were also commanded not to pass or enter some premises such as the kraal area or the home of a newborn baby. It is a common belief amongst the Basotho people that a menstruating girls or women were not

allowed to visit a newborn baby as they will make the baby sick (Sekese 1975). If for any reason such a person has to come into the home of a newborn, a particular action should be taken or else the child will fall sick or even die. Similarly, not finishing water while drinking, it was believed that it affected women during delivery. The contention was that during delivery, a woman will give birth to children with long heads (with fluids at the back). Children of this nature hardly survive hence a ritual should be done to culminate this. The following are more of such example:

- *Se ke ua ema monyako* (Do not stand on the doorway): The meaning of this saying is threefold. It is believed that a girl will encounter problems during delivery by the time she gets married; a pregnant woman will struggle to give birth because the child will stop at the exit and be injured or even die; as a girl stands at the doorway, light penetrates and lead to people seeing through her dress. This would tempt boys who would in turn tempt her to engage in early sex. It was also said that one will have a heavy menstrual flow. Of course, all these deep explanations were not given.
- *Se ke ua qeta metsi ha u noa* (Do not finish the cup/calabash/glass when drinking water) (Lekhotla la Sesotho 2005/6): It was believed that women would give birth to children with long heads (full of liquid), which would also cause severe labour complications.
- *Se ke ua tsamaea patlellong* (Do not walk around the kraal area especially when on monthly period): The fear is that the livestock will miscarry or they will also have prolonged menstruation flow.
- *Se ke ua tsoa monyako ka santharo (u checha)* (Do not go out of the door in reverse): According to Mokitimi (1979:12), girls were forbidden to exit in reverse or return at the exit because it was said that by the time they are women and are to give birth, their babies will come in reverse (breach birth) or will come and go back or just stop at the exit. These might result in the death of the birthing mother, the unborn baby or both.
- *U se ke ua parola lihoofolo ka lehare* (Do not pass amongst livestock): It is feared that their menstrual period will be prolonged because of some traditional medicines/muti used to protect animals from theft and other ailments.
- *U se ke ua robala u hlabile mankokoane* (Do not sleep facing upwards with your knees bent). According to Mokitimi (1979:9), it was said that the uterus will move out of place. Such a girl will not conceive by the time she gets married as the uterus will be out of place.

- *U se ke ua ua tlola ropo ea phoofolo* (Do not skip a rope that is being pulled by an animal): Menstrual period will be prolonged because of some medicines that are used to protect animals from theft.

It can be seen, therefore, that most tabooic expressions were not only meant to educate girls but also to protect and maintain their wellbeing and that of the society at large. Basotho do not like frequent deaths and any kind of disability; they would do anything in their power to avoid such things. So, girls, as future women, were brought up in a very strict manner so that when they get married they do not reflect badly on their families. Parents had to work hard to nurture their children to be responsible and caring parents in the future.

### **Tabooic expressions for boys**

There were tabooic expressions that were meant to educate and raise boys as well. As future leaders they were prepared to be brave, active and healthy men who could provide for their families and their communities at large. They were supposed to protect their families and villages against enemies as well as to respect and take care of their elderly. A love of animals was instilled in them so that they grow up knowing how to take good care of their wealth. On the basis of these, a boy, unlike a girl, was warned against anything that might be hazardous to lives of his family, society and his livestock or the nation as whole. They were not supposed to urinate on fire and water for fear of ill-health and security of their wellbeing respectively, not to eat the pancreas of a slaughtered animal to avoid laziness, and not to sit like women, and many others as exemplified below:

- *U se ke oa lula o shebile ka mollong* (Do not sit facing the fire place): Boys were warned against sitting facing the fire. They would rather turn their backs towards fire. It is said that they will cause damage to their reproductive organs. Too much heat will destroy the testicles resulting in them being barren or having baby girls only. Boys, as future men, were expected to have heirs. It was a shame for a family not to have a baby boy who will take after his father. In the absence of a baby boy, a man had to take a second wife in order to have a heir (*o nyala sethepu*).
- *Se ke ua lula joaloka mosali/ Se ke ua lula u ipharile kapa o namme* (Do not sit like a woman/ Do not sit flat on buttocks with your legs stretched): A male is a family protector and should always be alert; sitting in a manner that permitted him to rise with ease should anything happen. For instance, when the dogs bark, he should rise quickly to see what might be the cause of the disturbance.

- *Se ke ua ja phapooane* (Do not eat that particular part of a liver): It was said that he will always walk on the periphery of the road/ off the route/direction in all aspects of life (will never be successful). Some believe that the real reason was that this soft meat was normally spared for the elderly because they have lost their teeth and could not eat properly. The Sesotho Academy (2005/6) says that it is one of the foods that has a bad influence to the body.
- *Se ke ua rotela ka metsing hobane khomo eno e tla tsoalla ka metsing* (Do not urinate into the water because a cow from your kraal will give birth to its calf into the water): This was said to safeguard the cleanliness of the drinking water and the water sources at large.
- *Se ke ua tsirola nama ka matsoho* (Do not cut meat with your hands while eating). There is a belief that cutting meat with your hands while eating will cause the penises of male children to grow too big resulting in him not to lose female partners later in life.
- *Se ke ua ja manyeme u tla ba botsoa* (Do not eat the pancreas because you will be lazy).
- *Se ke ua rotela mollo, u tla tsoa mokunkela* (Do not urinate onto the fire; you will grow piles [haemorrhoids]).
- *U se ke ua sebelisa khamelo bakeng sa mesebetsi e meng, khomo e tla taboha metsoele* (Do not use the milking pot for other purposes, your cow will suffer from mastitis).

### **Tabooic expressions for both girls and boys**

Over and above the expressions that were gender based, some were used for both boys and girls. Theft, ill-health, greediness, lack of respect, laziness and lack of confidentiality were highly prohibited. Each and every member of a society was expected to engage in work of some sort and to contribute to the community development activities. Any action that might lead to laziness and unnecessary expenses or any talk that might result in conflicts was done away with.

Death was mostly feared by Basotho and was regarded as a misfortune. Thus, they warned children and made them avoid anything that is likely to cause death. Children were not supposed to sit with their heads facing down or to put their blankets covering their heads or even sing songs that are related to death in fear that they might bring some kind of omen. Both boys and girls were cautioned against this natural phenomenon and many others as exemplified below:

- *Se ke ua sheba motho o moholo ka hanong* (Do not look into the elder's mouth when they are talking): A Mosotho child was not allowed to look at elders as they speak. It was said that the

child will be a liar, or will lack confidence in that s/he will say things that it is not supposed to say.

- *Se ke ua lula le batho ba baholo* (Do not always sit around elders): If a youngster was to always be around adults he will hear what he is not supposed to hear. Adults talk and share issues relating to old age which should not be heard by youngsters.
- *Se ke ua tsamaea u ntse u ja, u tla khala* (Do not walk around while eating, that signals greediness). This was said to encourage good table manners.
- *Se ke ua bua u ntse u ja u tla ba leshano* (Do not talk while eating; you will become a liar). This was for both good table manner and to prevent them from choking with food.
- *Se ke ua lula ka tseleng, u tla tsoa mokunkela* Do not sit on the path, you will suffer from piles.
- *U se ke ua supa lebitla u tla tsoa setopa* (Do not point at a grave or you will develop a boil on the finger.)
- *U se ke ua tsamaea har'a motse o ikhurumelitse* (Do not walk around the village with your blanket covering your head): Covering your head signals mourning and one is said to bring omen such as death.
- *Se ke ua lula u furaletse mollo u tla fetoha tšoene* (Do not sit with your back facing the fireplace because you will turn into a monkey): A child, especially a young one or a toddler, may get burnt causing unnecessary expenses and creating many problems for the family. Carelessness is not acceptable in Sesotho.
- *Se ke ua pheta tšomo motšoare – o tla mela manaka* (Do not tell a folktale during the day for you will grow horns): If this was to be allowed, it would hinder the children from performing their chores. Basotho do not appreciate laziness. They always want one to do something rather than just sit. They have the saying “*moketa ho tsooa o itekang*” and “*matsoho a lemisetsa 'metso*”, meaning that if one does not take initiative, starvation will ensue and such a person is termed “*sekhoba*”.
- *Se ke ua lula u kentse hlooho ka linokeng* (Do not squat with the head between the thighs): Sitting with one's head facing down was associated with mourning. Elders avoided sitting in this manner for they feared that it brings some kind of bad fortune such as death.

### **Relevance of tabooic expressions**

In terms of their educative value, taboos are still relevant, especially at this point in time when the nation is highly concerned about the rate at which people die of HIV/AIDS. The use of tabooic expressions becomes deterrents against unbecoming behaviour. People will then revise their way of living and adopt behavioural pattern that will circumvent any risky outcomes. This way of disseminating information through warnings should be engaged. Parents should show deference towards their children by not engaging in actions or discussion about certain topics in the presence of their children. Taboos are relevant because they assist in the upbringing of a Mosotho child. Because they emanate from the parents' life experiences, taboos often represent true meaning.

It was through tabooic expressions that children are taught self-respect and respect of others. Children are prohibited from questioning the rationale behind the use of tabooic expressions; they are only expected to observe the rules. The uses of tabooic expressions were to avoid life hazards and make Basotho self-conscious of their behaviours.

Most Basotho still hold to the use of taboos but the nature of their transmission (oral), results in many fading away. Even those that continue to use these tabooic expressions do not know their meaning, which weakens their transmission. The Basotho would not be where they are had they relinquished the use of tabooic expressions in educating their children. The high mortality rate of women during delivery, the high mortality rate of newborns, various diseases as well as a large number of deformed children could be ascribed to the neglect of tabooic expressions (Sekese 1970).

### **Conclusion and recommendations**

In the preceding discussion, tabooic expressions in Sesotho have been highlighted. Their significance in the upbringing of children was shown. These expressions address issues that pertain to both boys and girls, for instance, they should be told that they should not eat certain food; however it is recommended that these expressions be revised. Issues pertaining to sex, childbirth, menstruation, theft, laziness which are considered taboo should be discussed and treated openly so that the youth, more especially girls, will realise that the consequences of their unacceptable behaviours will attest to the saying, "prevention is better than cure".

Taboos expressions should be incorporated into school curriculum because children spend most of their time at school and exhibit fewer inhibitions with their teachers than their parents, they may absorb the content of taboos better if they are made part of the school curriculum. This should be treated under cultural topics so that it is disseminated to a larger population for the betterment of their future.



In short, parents should not hide the core issue or the intended message but should feel free to discuss matters relating to the safety and wellbeing with their children.

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