

A STRATEGIC ANALYSIS OF THE FOLKTALE OF *TSELANE LE DIMO*

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ABSTRACT

In conflict and warfare, strategy, more than tactic is a primary vehicle and instrument for competitive advantage or victory. In the *tshomo* (folk story) of *Tselane Le Dimo*, the protagonist or heroine is engaged in a conflict of advantage with the antagonist or villain. Generally, folk narratives are regarded as didactic genres aimed at teaching young people certain morals or ways of conduct or warn against certain taboos. In this study, I shift this received reading to argue that more than didacticism, there is a higher level of discourse in folk narratives, which includes strategy as a primary instrument over tactic, and that the folk narrative of “Tselane” is an ideal exemplar for this reading of complex strategic planning.

Keywords: advantage; SMART; strategy; SWOT; tactic

INTRODUCTION

This article argues that folk narratives were not “preoccupied with what was thought fitting for children to know” (Finnegan 1984, 28); but transcended mere didacticism and acculturation; and included high-level strategies for personal development, coping strategies in situations of conflict, as well as the struggle for survival. To this effect, I shall undertake a deconstructive study of the *tshomo* of “Tselane”, employing “strategic planning” as a basic tool for survival with overarching elements of deception, surprise, erroneous judgment, omission, and complacency. I will employ, as my theoretical framework, the SWOT (Shortcoming, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analysis, as well as the SMART (Specific, Measurable, Agreed upon, Realistic and Time lines) principles, which I have borrowed from corporate management.



I define strategy as competition for advantage, and conflict as any situation where two or more opposing parties have goals which stand in binary opposition to each other—the parties engage in vying or competing for a prize, tangible or intangible, or strive for survival; where one party’s continued existence depends on exploiting the other, or outwitting the other, or in the extreme, annihilating the other.

“Strategic planning” is often associated with competition in a corporate environment, where lessons from the successes or failures of strategies are often drawn from anecdotal or hypothetical experience. A “strategic plan” (<http://pestleanalysis.com>) is defined as:

[A] high-level plan that provides a framework for a business’s overall strategy for success. It is used by business owners and managers to provide the organization a clear focus. The process of creating a strategic plan involves analyzing the prevailing business market [...] setting goals and mapping out a course that will indicate how the business would work to achieve these goals.

SWOT analysis and SMART goals are generally used as frameworks and indispensable parts of strategic planning. The former “provides businesses a clear view of the advantages they have over competitors and their vulnerabilities. It is mainly used by businesses to create effective business plans/strategies and for comparison with its competitors” (<http://pestleanalysis.com>). SMART “is an acronym for the five elements of specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-base. It’s a simple tool used by business to go beyond the realm of fuzzy goal-setting” (Zahorsy 2016). This article seeks to illustrate that strategic planning and implementation is an age-old exercise, and to this effect, undertakes to analyse a Sesotho *tshomo*, of “Tselane”, by adopting and adapting the business world as a microcosm of the broader world. This article argues that in the centre of strategic implementation lies the idea of out-maneuvering the opponent; as Sun Tzu puts it: “All warfare is based on deception” (2003, 91) and “Deception and surprise are two key principles ... It is often possible, by adopting all kinds of measures of deception, to drive the enemy [antagonist] into the plight of making erroneous judgments ... and taking erroneous actions” (1971, 53). Naturally the corporate and business world would not admit the elements of deception, even though there are serious cases where international businesses have used deception, overtly or covertly against competitors e.g. the *Branson v British Airways* (Harrison 1993), where the latter allegedly used unorthodox, unethical and deceptive methods or tactics to lure Virgin Atlantic Airway’s clients (Harrison 1993). In eliminating certain lines of potentially persuasive approaches, this article confesses that although the central theme of the narrative we are concerned with centres on mother-daughter relationship, our interest is neither in the feminist theory, where “The overwhelming impression of mother-figures given by the most recognizable versions of our culture’s most popular tales and myths is evil, absent, or unpleasant mothers” (Schanoes 2014, 15)—nor in typologies of structure of the tale and functions of characters, that is absentation, interdiction, violation, reconnaissance, delivery, etc.] (Propp 1975). In the *tshomo* of Tselane, there is indeed an element of absence, when the mother leaves the daughter and

migrates to another place of abode, but this is not the analytical thread that we would like to pursue, as it is linear and straightforward. This analysis will overarch the SWOT analysis and SMART principles with five super-structural elements; namely deception, surprise, erroneous judgment, omission, and complacency.

THE STORY AND PLOT OF “TSELANE”

In this *tshomo* Tselane and her mother dwell in the midst of a forest. After a long period of their habitation there, Tselane’s mother suggests to her daughter that they should migrate to another place of abode. Tselane is reluctant to leave, and they eventually agree that Mmatsetlane would migrate and leave her daughter behind. She would, however, come to visit her on a daily basis and deliver culinary provision for her. Since the forest was treacherous, the mother warns Tselane not to open the door for anyone but herself. In order to secure her safety, they devise a semiotic code that her mother would use for Tselane to know when it’s her and open the door, lest she lets in a dangerous enemy, especially Dimo, a cannibal who lived in the vicinity of their dwelling place. Their code was a song which went:

*Tselane, nogoan’a ke; Tselane, nogoan’a ke,
Nka, nka bohobe u je, Tselane, nogoan’a ke.*

(“Tselane my child; Tselane my child”)
(“Take, take bread and eat, Tselane my child.”)

Tselane would then respond in this refrain:

*Kea utloa ’m è; kea utlwa, ’mè;
'M è o bua sa nonyana thaha,
O bua sa tsoere e lutse lehlakeng.* (Jacottet 1985, 31)

(“I hear you, mother; I hear you, mother”);
(“Mother talks like the tsoere perched in the reeds.”)

On hearing the code Tselane would open the door and her mother would enter, and they would join each other in the safety of a locked house. At dusk Mmatsetlane would leave, to return the next day. All the time Dimo, mentioned above, would watch them from a distance, until one day he decided that it was time to make a move and capture Tselane. Just before Tselane’s mother arrived, Dimo tried deception by going to the door and started singing the code song:

*Tselane, nogoan’a ke; Tselane, nogoan’a ke,
Nka, nka bohobe u je, Tselane, nogoan’a ke.*

However, Dimo's voice was so hoarse that Tselane could not have mistaken it for her mother's. Dimo tried this trick several times but in vain. Eventually, he gave up on his futile attempts. But subsequently, he pondered over a possible strategy, which he thought might lead to success. He went to consult a medicine man/woman, who advised him to put an iron rod in burning coal, and when it was red with heat, shove it down his throat to cleanse the hoarseness of his voice. After administering this prescription, Dimo went back to Tselane's house to deceive her into letting him in. His mission was accomplished and he captured Tselane, put her in a bag and strutted away in victory.

On his way home he kept singing (Jacottet 1985, 32):

Khetsi ea limo, kholoma. Kholoma re utloe!

("Speak, limo's bag, speak so that we can hear!")

Tselane responded:

*Ke ea kholoma, ke kholome ke r'eng oee, limo!
Khom tseso li ka linaleli le joang ba tsane, oee, limo!*

("I speak, speak and say what, limo!")

("The cattle at my home are as many as stars and tsane grass!")

The song and response were Dimo's strategy of ascertaining that Tselane was still in the bag. Dimo wanted to avoid complacency and applied this as a risk management and risk control strategy.

Then Dimo got tired and took a detour to a tavern to carouse before getting home. He put the bag outside the house and joined a group of fellow drinkers. While Dimo was carousing, some children who were playing nearby heard a voice inside Dimo's bag, murmuring. Their curiosity got the better of them and they got closer to the bag. They heard a person crying inside the bag. They opened it and found Tselane inside. They decided to take Tselane out and put a swarm of bees in her stead so that Dimo would not find it empty. When he was done drinking, Dimo took the bag, threw it over his shoulder and staggered home, inebriated. On his arrival, he chased his spouse and children out of the home and bolted the door, so that he could enjoy his loot all by himself. When he opened the bag, the bees flew out and stung him. He screamed with pain, but his family was not able to help him because he had bolted the door inside. He eventually managed to break the door and dashed out. He ran to the river and took a dive, in order to get rid of the bees. He drowned and, *ke tshomo ka matheto* ("thus ends the story").

In the next section, we proceed to analyse the characters and plot of the narrative in terms of strategic perspectives.

STRATEGIC PERSPECTIVES

Strategy is a planned, contemplated and structured self-deployment or deployment of resources, material and immaterial. In this *tshomo* there are two possible empathetic perspectives with regard to strategy; one being Mmatsetlane's perspective and the other being Dimo's perspective. Mmatsetlane's strategy can be evaluated from two perspectives, which I will elaborate upon after discussing the two primary opposing strategies. The five elements mentioned as the super-structure are at play for both parties—on the one hand, the elements are at play on the part of Tselane and her mother, and on the other hand, on the part of Dimo: 1) Deception—Dimo deceives Tselane by singing like her mother, 2) Tselane is taken by surprise, because she never contemplated that Dimo would break the code, 3) After capturing Tselane, Dimo is alert and sings for Tselane to respond; as a risk management and risk control strategy. However, as he walks along, 4) he lapses into complacency, with a false sense of security that his quarry is now secure in captivity. 5) This element also includes an error of judgment, where Dimo lets down his guard by drinking; and lastly 6) omission, where Tselane and her mother did not take measures to secure the code by not changing it. In certain instances, one or two of these elements occur concurrently.

The tactical elements of the strategy have been deconstructed as follows:

EMPATHY WITH DIMO'S PERSPECTIVE

- i. Empathy with Dimo—he is the agent of the project.
- ii. Capturing Tselane is Dimo's goal.
- iii. Dimo has to devise a strategy.
- iv. He fails after several attempts.
- v. Dimo does a SWOT analysis of the situation.
- vi. He devises an offensive strategy to break the code.

Dimo's strategic goal is to capture Tselane. After one or more attempts at simulating Mmatsetlane's voice (deception) he realises that his chances of success are very slim. He then resorts to strategic planning, in which he assesses the SWOT. Dimo is huge and strong (Strength) but he cannot break down the walls of Tselane's hut (Weakness). As long as Tselane does not move house to join her mother, she remains vulnerable; and there is a chance that he may break the code (Opportunity). However, he is not certain whether Mmatsetlane might convince her daughter to migrate (Threat).

EMPATHY WITH MMATSELANE’S PERSPECTIVE

Stimulus—to migrate and seek better living conditions but Tselane wants to remain in the old abode.

- a. Mmatselane’s goal is to provide food for Tselane and protect her.
- b. Mmatselane takes stock of the situation.
- c. Mmatselane and Tselane devise a defensive strategy—a sign (“password”/“PIC” – “Personal Identification Code”) or signal/signifier for Mmatselane’s arrival.
- d. They devise a signal for Tselane’s response.
- e. She implements the strategy several times and it works.

Tselane and Mmatselane’s strategy has all the elements of SMART goals. It comprises a song with lyrics and a response, and the elements of voice and lyrics, which are recognisable to both (Specific)—it is discussed and adopted by both (Achievable/Agreed upon); and both of them can sing their parts (Realistic); and there is a set time at which Mmatselane would arrive and depart (Timeline based). Dimo’s failure to break the code in his first attempts might have been a consequence of flouting some or all of the elements of the principles. He could not sing, he had no agreement with Tselane and his voice rendered his attempts unrealistic and futile. Moreover, he might have arrived before the time arranged for Mmatselane’s arrival. Thus, he flouted all the principles of goal setting.

The difference between Dimo and Mmatselane’s strategies is that both are mutually exclusive, therefore rendering one vulnerable to the other. Dimo focused on the SWOT analysis, and as an unintended consequence, it overarched on the SMART principles—whereas Mmatselane’s strategy was weak on SWOT analysis, which might have helped her frustrate and demobilise Dimo’s strategy. Thus, the former’s execution undermined and overrode Mmatselane’s. Another main disparity between the strategies of the two contending parties is defensive versus offensive deception; hers is defensive (securing a code) while Dimo’s strategy is offensive (breaking the code). We will come back to deconstructing Mmatselane’s strategy in terms of the SWOT analysis later.

ALTERNATIVE DECONSTRUCTION OF MMATSELANE’S STRATEGY

- a. Mmatselane’s goal is to provide security for Tselane.
- b. She assesses the environment and realises that Tselane might not be safe.
- c. She puts measures in place to ascertain and reinforce security.

- d. Her measures are initially successful.
- e. She repeats her security ritual and becomes complacent.
- f. Dimo is able to break the code.

The above points illustrate that Mmatsetlane’s plan was that when she leaves, Tselane must keep the door locked until she comes back, and improvises a song that will serve as a code (Strength). Reconnaissance of the environment suggests to her that Tselane is vulnerable and her safety and security need to be reinforced (Weakness). Her coming and going would serve as a way of executing her parental or maternal duties (Opportunity). There is a possibility that the code may be breached (Threat). It is in the last regard that her strategy leaves a loophole for Dimo to subvert her strategy because she does not put any measure in place to secure the code. In this regard, one might suggest that whereas Dimo took all the steps in the SWOT analysis, on the other hand, Tselane’s mother overlooked one step. Thus, Dimo had only to work on one strategy and ignore the SMART principle, in that he was acting alone, and could act as and when he wants, without any time constraints.

STRATEGIC FAILURE – DIMO AND MMATSELANE

There are common elements in both Dimo and Mmatsetlane’s execution of strategy:

Mmatsetlane	Dimo
Mmatsetlane’s blind spot is complacency and she does not see the loophole in her strategy.	Dimo’s blind spot is complacency and does not plan ahead as to how he would get Tselane to his place after capturing her; he takes it as <i>fait accompli</i> .
Mmatsetlane’s tactical error occurs after execution several times.	Dimo’s tactical error occurs after execution once.
c. Mmatsetlane’s tactic goes into the mechanical mode by repeating the same code, thinking that she has achieved her goal.	Dimo starts by taking risk management and risk control but later lapses into complacency. He goes into dormancy mode by relaxing, thinking that he has achieved his goal.
d. Mmatsetlane’s code is thus broken by Dimo, due to her complacency.	Dimo’s victory is thwarted by children who rescue Tselane, due to Dimo’s complacency. This is by serendipity but not anyone’s strategy or tactic.
It is not through the weakness of strategy but the lapse of one element, security or continued vigilance (confluence of complacency and omission) that both Mmatsetlane and Dimo’s strategic executions are breached.	

Dimo's strategic success was based on two elements, which are active and passive. In the former regard he took the offense by mastering the code and imitating the voice of Tselane's mother competently (deception), and catching Tselane off guard (surprise)—while in the latter regard Tselane opened the door (erroneous judgment) and, perhaps without studying the nuances in Dimo's voice and the timing of Dimo's arrival (omission), as opposed to the time agreed upon by her and her mother. Tselane's escape from Dimo's bag is not a result of a strategy but sheer luck. She and her mother did not have a secondary plan in place (complacency and omission) in case their defensive strategy failed. At the same time, Dimo did not plan beyond his offensive strategy of capturing Tselane (complacency and omission). He did not plan how to sustain his victory (complacency). Therefore, both Mmatsetlane and Tselane's escape on the one hand, and Dimo's death on the other, came about by happenstance rather than strategy or tactical maneuver. Thus the protagonist and antagonist are rendered almost more similar than different in strategic lapses—the difference being determined by chance, but not by strategy. On the other hand, one may argue that the strategy for Tselane's release came by tritagonist intervention—a strategy improvised by the children who heard Tselane in distress inside Dimo's bag. Dimo's final demise is a post-strategic event, which arose out of selfishness and greed—that is, his desire to exclude his family from partaking in the spoils of his hunt.

CONCLUSION

The approach which this article has taken departs from the orthodox reading or interpreting and reading of folk narratives from a purely didactic point of view; or from a theoretical perspective, by employing a framework which is derived from a “strategic planning” perspective. It has gone beyond simply superimposing a strategic plan approach on the narrative of “Tselane”, by adding another dimension of illuminating possibilities of centering and shifting the perspective of agency from Dimo (the antagonist), to Mmatsetlane and Tselane (protagonists); and by pointing out how all these perspectives (empathetic points of view) manifest weaknesses that can lead to strategic failure and tactical error.

The connotative assumptions which this article has made is that without a goal/prize at stake there can be no conflict, and that strategic planning is the element that turns the conflict into drama, takes it from the beginning (exposition), through to the climax (middle); and ultimately, the denouement (resolution) and conclusion (end). The article thus suggests the propensity of a new multiplicity of analytical possibilities in the reading of folk narratives, which can be relevant even in a new, and for that matter, corporate environment. The SWOT analytical approach and SMART goals are but two of many possible readings of folk narratives in postmodernity. The framework of this analysis has also introduced the five important elements, which arches over the SMART

principles and SWOT analysis; namely deception, surprise, erroneous judgment, and omission.

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