

RE-ENGAGING CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES ON DISABILITY DISCOURSE: AN ANALYSIS OF THE BAKOSSI AND ISIXHOSA ORAL TRADITIONS

Enongene Mirabeau Sone

Walter Sisulu University, South Africa
senongene@wsu.ac.za

Mfusi Hoza

Walter Sisulu University, South Africa
mhoza@wsu.ac.za

ABSTRACT

A healthy society is one where members make efforts to work together as people from diverse backgrounds towards achieving society's goals. Although this seems to be a difficult task, some societies have made, and continue to make conscious efforts to achieve this purpose by enacting laws that prohibit discrimination based on disability, race, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity and colour. This article examines the perceptions and conceptualisations of disabilities as portrayed in the Bakossi and isiXhosa oral traditions of Cameroon and South Africa respectively. The article argues that the oral traditions of these communities are heavily loaded with images that highlight stereotypical notions that these societies hold towards disabled persons. The images reveal that these categories of people are the most stigmatised, prejudiced and marginalised. In other words, people with disabilities have been pushed to the margins of society, and face socially-constructed barriers that prevent them from fully participating in many domains of society's mainstream activities. Undertaken against the background of the sociological and psychoanalytic theories, the study concludes by recommending that inasmuch as disabled people are recognised as existing among the Bakossi and amaXhosa, they should be wholly integrated into their respective societies and treated like other members of the society; as some of them have hidden potentials that can be exploited to salvage society from various trials and tribulations.

Keywords: amaXhosa; Bakossi; disability; oral literature; paradigms; perceptions



INTRODUCTION

Over the years, perceptions about disability have varied significantly from one community to another. Available literature on disability in various oral traditions however, continue to pose a great challenge to students of disability studies in their endeavour to trace the development and formation of perceptions towards persons with disabilities. In many of these traditions, disabled persons have been portrayed negatively in demeaning and dehumanising, stereotypical ways. The prevalence and persistence of this negative imagery, as well as the paucity of representations of disabled persons in folklores can be viewed as both a symptom and cause of the lack of equality for disabled people. Oral literature provides a powerful lens through which to challenge and reconfigure such negative representation; and highlights the cultural, attitudinal and social barriers that disabled people face in their struggle for equality and basic human rights. Like in any other human society, the folklore of the Bakossi and amaXhosa serves as both the store and purveyor of human thoughts, aspirations and identity. This is done through oral literature forms such as folktales, myths, legends, praises, proverbs, riddles, songs and many other forms. The societal wisdom and entertainment conjured by these forms gives the people from these ethnic groups a common identity and perception of societal issues. The current global debate on the marginalisation of some groups in society encompasses the disabled. It reveals that disability in society always attracts a form of social oppression. Evidence shows that there exist numerous inequalities and inequities in how the disabled are attended to, as well as the benefits extended to them. In most African societies, disability is regarded as a deplorable and unfortunate condition. Unfortunately to date, little attention has been paid to analysing the role of oral literature in propagating this general social disregard of the disabled. Many scholars who have investigated the role of oral literature in the two communities in forming perceptions, stereotypes and attitudes of people tend to concentrate more on marginalised groups such as women, paying little attention to disabled persons. Drawing from the folktales, songs and proverbs on disability among the Bakossi and the Xhosa, this article attempts to delineate the portrayal of disability in these societies.

The Bakossi people of Cameroon and the amaXhosa of South Africa, whose oral literature is the focus of this article; like other people elsewhere, are inseparable from their culture; for culture is the totality of the ideas, thoughts, concepts, values and beliefs which characterise their societies. These cultural elements are manifested in their oral literature, which have been, and are still being profoundly influenced by their immediate environments. Within their respective environments, disability is one of the most appalling of the human predicament. It is for this reason that the oral literature of both communities is heavily loaded with images that highlight stereotypical notions both societies have towards disabled persons. The images reveal that these categories of people are the most stigmatised, prejudiced and marginalised. In other words, people with disabilities have been pushed to the margins of society, facing socially-constructed barriers that prevent them from fully participating in society's mainstream activities.

LOCATING THE BAKOSSI AND AMAXHOSA

The Bakossi ethnic group is found in Kupe Munanenguba division of the South West region of Cameroon. Akoose is the main language spoken by the Bakossi people with differences in accents, depending on the geographical location. The language is classified as one of the big Bantu group termed the Northern Bantu languages. Richardson (1957) divides this group into the Douala, the Bakundu, the Bakweri and the Bassa. On the other hand, IsiXhosa is one of the Nguni languages. It falls under the Bantu languages and is spoken mainly by people living in the South Eastern and Western regions of South Africa. The isiXhosa-speaking people can be divided into quite a few different subgroups with related but distinguishable heritages—for example amaXhosa, amaRharhabe, amaMfengu, and abaThembu. There is some difference of opinion about the origin of the name “Xhosa.” Some oral sources say that it was derived from the name of one of their legendary leaders, uXhosa. Others say the word “xhosa” comes from a word in the San or Khoikhoi language, which means “angry” or “fierce”. However, amaXhosa describe themselves as amaXhosa, meaning “the fierce people.”

Traditionally, language symbols were frequently used by amaXhosa and the Bakossi people to shape their culture as well as instill values that were highly regarded in their society; such as *ubuntu* (“humanity”). Their oral traditions were passed on from generation to generation—through narratives, proverbs, idioms, riddles, songs and praise poems.

CONCEPTUALISING THE DISABILITY PARADIGM

A paradigm is defined as the manner in which a person views the world around him or her. This does not refer to the physical act of looking, but rather the way people perceive, understand and interpret situations and objects in their environment. It is acknowledged that paradigms form the foundations of people’s attitudes and behaviours; and include the way in which people think, see, evaluate and make assumptions about the world (Covey 1992; Gabel and Peters 2004; Naicker 2000). Therefore, the paradigms to which people subscribe regarding disability will have an influence on how they perceive and treat people with disabilities. In order to overcome the existing challenges in the integration of people with disabilities into society, it is important to understand what the different paradigms advocate. There are two opposing views on disability studies. The first viewpoint locates the disability in the person concerned, paying little or no attention to the physical or social environment (Burchardt 2004; Marks 1997; Marks 1999; Shakespeare and Watson 1997). This is referred to as the “medical model” of disability. Secondly, there are people who perceive disability as a social construct; where disability results from the inability of the physical and social environment to accommodate the needs of individuals within a particular group of people. This view is known as the “social model” of disability. Historically, these two views were seen as being at opposite ends of the disability continuum.

From the definition perspective, attempts to define the term “disability” have generated much debate—as this is a term which, even scholars in the field of disability studies do not agree on. Part of the complexity of the task emanates from the fact that, in the social model, “disability” is deemed a condition different from “impairment.” This distinction stems from a disciplinary focus on either the individual’s anatomy or their place in society. The term “impairment” draws attention to bodily difference, seen as “lacking part of or all of a limb, or having a defective limb, organ or mechanism of the body” (Oliver 1990, 22); whereas disability is seen as “the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organisation which takes no or little account of people who have physical impairments and thus excludes them from participation in the mainstream of social activities” (Oliver 1990, 22). In June 2007, the South African government signed and adopted the United Nations’ (UN) Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (CRPD). The Convention provides a definition of a person with disabilities that states that “Persons with disabilities include those that have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation on an equal basis with others” (UN 2006: Article 1 Purpose). This definition has its roots in the social model of disability, as it recognises the link between the impairment and the environment. Even though the above definition agrees with the objectives of this study, in the context of this article, a disabled individual is considered as any person, whose ability to function in a “normal” manner is limited by physical, cognitive, visual or environmental factors.

THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is conceived within the framework of the sociological and psychoanalytic theories. The sociological theory deals with the relationship between literature and society. The relevance of this theory to this study is based on the premise that disability can be socially constructed; through the actions of society in erecting barriers and structures that limit the ability of certain persons in society to function “normally.” Such barriers also limit the ability of such persons to access the opportunities, privileges and resources in society. To a lesser extent however, a psychoanalytic theory was also taken into consideration, as the author of a text sheds onto it his/her repressed fears and passions, latent in his/her subconscious. Considering that the selected folktales and proverbs are texts authored by society, the authors of this article therefore, concur with Wright’s (as quoted in Ann 1982, 149) view that “the author cannot hide anything away from his/her text.” This means then, that society as the author of these texts unconsciously “sheds” its repressions on them, which influence the perceptions of their consumers.

This study involved both secondary and primary data. The researchers obtained secondary data from the review of documents from both published and unpublished sources. These included monographs, journal articles, manuscripts, books and

dissertations that deal with disability in Bakossi and amaXhosa oral traditions. For primary data, the researchers did fieldwork, conducted oral interviews, and posed questions to some of the disabled and non-disabled members of both communities. Furthermore, oral literature forms under study were tape recorded, collected, transcribed and translated in life and simulated performances in selected villages in Xhosa and Bakossi lands in Cameroon and South Africa respectively.

PERCEPTIONS OF DISABILITY: A REVIEW

Sufficient evidence exists to suggest that disabilities have always existed in every human society. Armstrong (1999), Barnes (2008) and Marks (1997) all view the disability problem in society as a lifelong issue. Armstrong (1999, 1) argues that the task of dealing with the problem of disability is quite enormous, as it requires rectifying the “situational aspects of social experience of the disabled.” To him, the task is even harder since it requires the attention of every society; for there exists no known society without people with disabilities. The fact that disability is a universal condition prevalent in every society implies that there should be no negative attitudes towards persons with disabilities. All people have lived with disabled persons, and should therefore accept disability as a normal condition in life. Unfortunately, this is not the case. In Cameroon, for example, the national constitution (1996) devotes article 35 to the protection of disabled persons against marginalisation—this is also the case with the South African national constitution. This move has prompted the implementation of affirmative action measures such as allocating a specific number of seats in the country’s legislative assembly and other political units to people with disabilities (and even compelling institutions to make every entrance point in buildings accessible to disabled persons). Efforts such as these, set up to address the discrimination and stigmatisation of disabled persons are indicative of the gravity of the problem. One can therefore, deduce that the Bakossi and amaXhosa societies, just like many others the world over, have negative mindsets that stereotype disabled persons. The significant question however, is whether these are best measures to address the problem. The question of whether disability is socially constructed has well been addressed by scholars such as Smyke (1991), Degener (1995), Armstrong (1999) and Hendricks (1995). These scholars suggest that society determines who should be referred to as disabled; as well as the attitude that members of the society show towards such a person. Hendricks (1995, 43) particularly goes beyond the physical limitation to the functional limitation of the disabled person. He suggests that as long as another person “performs” differently, or does not “perform” “where others members do, the concept of disability shall always arise.” Based on the foregoing discussion, it is important to emphasise that disability should not be perceived as a functional limitation or a condition similar to illness. If this were the case, disability would be an individual rather than a societal problem, as evidence suggests. The tendency of marginalising and discriminating against persons with disabilities is not

limited to non-disabled persons discriminating and stigmatising the disabled persons—often, the disabled persons are self-stigmatising.

Etongue-Mayer (2007, 15) in a study conducted in Cameroon, laments the fact that many deaf people in traditional societies in Cameroon “regarded their inability to hear as a nuisance... The birth of a deaf child was a major misfortune.” This discovery suggests that the affected deaf in Cameroonian communities consider themselves as unfortunate; and thus cannot be accorded the same regard in society as the non-deaf (this is the case in virtually every African society). A child raised in such an environment, where deaf people are frowned upon, will consequently develop a low self-esteem. Other scholars, such as Barnes (2008), have noted the problem of “Withdrawal” amongst disabled persons. Barnes (2008, 5) observes that “Dominant cultures are oppressive... in response, the oppressed disabled groups sometimes develop their own cultural norms and values.” These norms are therefore, not of the society in which they live, but rather of the “society” of the disabled themselves. On the other hand, the non-disabled (oppressors) develop a contemptuous and patronising attitude over the disabled. They usually feel uncertain and uncomfortable around the disabled, and as a result, may avoid interacting with them. The disabled consequently find the attitudes of the society in which they live unpleasant, and perhaps more disabling than their disability. The general view in all the works of the scholars cited above, in addition to others, seem to emphasise one fact: society establishes a means of categorising its members. Those who perform as the social norm dictates are complimented, while those who do not, are ridiculed.

DECONSTRUCTION OF THE PHYSICALLY DISABLED

Degener (1995, 9) observes that while disabled persons are the “smallest” minority in the world, for a very long time, they have been confronted with different kinds of disregard and mistreatment. Many people are of the view that a disabled person is less of a real person or citizen, who consequently needs special legislative protection. The constitutional policies of South Africa and Cameroon respectively, are cases in point. One such policy in the Preamble of Cameroon’s Constitution of 1996 states that:

Persons with disabilities have a right to respect and human dignity and the state shall take appropriate measures to ensure that they realize their full mental and physical potential.

The 1996 Constitution of the Republic of South Africa in Chapter two (2) Section nine (9) goes further to state that:

The state may not unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds, including, race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, colour or sexual orientation, age, disability, conscience, belief, culture, birth and language

Unfortunately, both constitutions bundle disabled persons with other vulnerable groups because of societal discrimination against them.

The object status of disabled groups was found in many of the analysed proverbs, songs and folktales of the Bakossi and amaXhosa. In many cases, the diction used directly attacks the victims, while in other cases; disability is perceived as retribution for wrongs committed by either the victims or their parents. This judgmental attitude greatly makes disabled persons uncomfortable; and also highlights the level of stigma that both societies attach to disability. Among the amaXhosa, disability in rural areas implies mental deficiency—hence the two ISIXHOSA terms *ISILIMA/ISIDALWA* (“CRIPPLE”). The term *ISILIMA* is derived from a noun *UKULIMALA*, meaning to be injured. The pertinent question is, *Did this person get injured if he/she was born with the disability?* Is the term not intended to remind her/him that she/he is different from others? The same is true of the term *ISIDALWA*, a term that carries extremely negative connotations. *Indalo* is Xhosa for God’s creation. All personal names in isiXhosa grammar belong to class 1 nouns, and the prefix for this class is *um-* (as in *umntu*). The prefix *isi-* belongs to impersonal nouns of class 7; for example *isitya* (“garden”). Is the use of this term therefore, not confirmation that these innocent people, created by God, are regarded as non-human by virtue of their disability—hence the term *isidalwa*?

Quite often, the lifestyle measures adopted by the physically impaired is ridiculed, and referred to with a lot of mockery. An example is a support stick used by the lame or cripple person to aid in walking. This stick is usually referred to as the “third leg” among the Bakossi. The physical anatomy of a human being demands only two legs for movement. Referring to the support stick as the third leg therefore, unconsciously implies that the victim is non-human. By employing such terms, society have deconstructed the victim and excluded him/her from the social class of humans and participation in the affairs of the society, as revealed in many folktales and proverbs.

THE LAME AND THE CRIPPLED

The word “lame” is an adjective. It means unable to walk properly due to an injury in the leg or foot. It can be used to describe people or animals, but more commonly animals these days.

On the other hand “cripple” is a noun. It describes a person who cannot walk due to a disability in the lower part of the body. It is an offensive word these days, and is no longer used. In the two societies under study, the usage of the two words evokes feelings of pity and sympathy to the character. Many proverbs and folktales depict this view:

“Epeh mod j’oh be ngan’ a Kwaah.” (Bakossi)

(“A lame person is the one who knows how he/she falls”)

This Bakossi proverb expresses the fact that a physically-handicapped person designs his/her peculiar way of falling or overcoming a hurdle. Implicitly, this suggests that a disabled person will have hardships in overcoming a problem, while for the non-disabled person, all will always be fine. This image has two effects: it elicits pity from the listener for the disabled victim; and at the same time encourages an attitude of self-pity and lack of self-esteem in the disabled victim. This image is highlighted in other proverbs.

Epeh mod e-kube mod awe heneh a ndited meng. (Bakossi)

(“A lame person arrests his/her victim at the time of eating.”)

Mod awe boh pimeh, e-pimeh mod nlub (Bakossi)

(“One, who is being carried, does not carry another.”)

Both these proverbs express a state of helplessness on the part of a disabled person. In the first proverb, the lame one can only overcome his/her enemy when the latter is seated and having a meal. Otherwise, the enemy will always be stronger. In the second proverb, if one is offered a lift due to his/her physical handicap, he/she cannot extend similar help, because he/she is helpless. Subjected to a deeper interpretation, the proverb insinuates that the lame is a charity case; and such a person cannot afford to be charitable to others.

Some proverbs use images which are abusive and vindictive. They insinuate a case of retribution or payment for evils committed by the victims.

Hud'epheh mod e-dii, mod e-lonkeh mamwii (Bakossi)

(“In the presence of a lame one, never bend your finger”)

E-sung-e mod e bule akan a-de tuu moh nntii (Bakossi)

(“A dwarf sets his height target low”)

E-lim e-hedeh mekii

(“Lameness is not only congenital: it may befall one later in life”).

The first proverb, for example, insinuates that a lame person is always thinking about his/her condition to an extent that even a simple action of bending one's finger will be seen as mimicking his/her unfortunate circumstance. The second proverb has the same effect as the first. A dwarf (regarded as lameness in this study) will always feel uneasy of his low set height target. On the other hand, the third proverb expresses a general warning to all that lameness is not necessarily congenital; since it can befall one at any

time. The proverb seems to inform the assumption that it is a taboo in both the Bakossi and Xhosa cultures to laugh at a lame person. Children are severely punished and older people seriously rebuked for any act that is interpreted as laughing or mimicking the lame. This taboo is necessary as it guards against complacency on the part of able bodied persons to regard their physical state as permanent. The problem here, however, is that the general wording of the proverb seems to suggest that a congenital disability would be more tolerable. Those who become lame later in life, therefore, will always feel uneasy and guilty, as if the lameness was self-inflicted.

Mod awe hede sankale nle mbaa, a-pim moh (Bakossi)

(“He who insists on an extraordinarily big head, carries it himself”).

Weh diage bindie bwam bwam a bel nana bum a ne hang weh (Bakossi)

(“Eat a little so as not to swell the stomach”).

Moh we diag e-jen ne e-jini a hange abum (Bakossi)

(“He who eats this and the other swells the stomach”).

The first proverb is directly offensive to the victim with a swollen or deformed head, stating that he himself insisted on carrying it. The second and third proverbs have the same effect, suggesting that the lameness is a result of greed on the part of the one who is affected. However, the social meaning of these proverbs could be different. The two conditions (a big head and swollen stomach) are deplorable among the Bakossi and the amaXhosa, and often will be used in situations of insult and abuse.

Images of restriction and alienation of the disabled are also portrayed in many proverbs, such as the following.

A beh a tug e-n' elim (Bakossi)

(Poverty is not lameness)

The proverb makes a comparison between poverty and lameness; and is commonly used to suggest that one's state of not having money at the material time, may not necessarily mean that he/she shall remain in the same condition; just as a lame carries his condition forever. True, many a times, lameness may be permanent, but this is not exclusive. Even if this was the case, to continually remind the victim of the permanence of his/her condition would be devastating and heart-breaking to him/her.

Budaza (1989), in his attempt to illustrate the amount of ridicule that disabled persons have to withstand, and meted upon them by members of their society writes in his isiXhosa book of essays:

Yaphakama enye indoda yachaza imeko ebuhlungu yokungamkeliswa kwesilimakazi esishwabene umlenze kude kuye ethangeni. Suka gquzu amanye amadoda ayiwa ngentsini.

“One man stood up and explained a painful situation of the omission of pension payment to a certain disabled woman whose leg was shriveled from the leg to the thigh. (Immediately there was a thunder of laughter from those men.”)

Images of the crippled and the lame depicted as weak and vulnerable victims are found in many Bakossi folktales. In tale one (1) below:

A woman called Ebude is lame and walks with a limp. She, however, lives a happy life with her husband. One day, her husband sets a trap to catch a fox that eats their chickens. However, a baby elephant walks into the trap instead, injuring herself badly; but manages to slowly limp back home. Unfortunately, baby elephant dies due to great pain. Mother elephant decides to find out who set the trap that has led to the death of her dear one. She therefore, hides herself in the bush behind where the trap has been set. When she sees Ebude walking by limping, she reckoned that she was mimicking her baby, who died after being caught by the trap. Mother elephant pounces on and tramples Ebude to death, convinced that it was Ebude who set the trap for her baby.

Here, Ebude’s only crime for which she dies, is limping. The mood in the tale no doubt is sad, sombre and gloomy. Ebude’s innocent death is pathetic, and elicits pity and sympathy, and moves any listener to tears. This innocent death of a woman, however ratifies the view pointed out above that limping is criminal in this society and portrays the one who limps as a social reject. No wonder even baby elephant dies after developing a limp.

In yet another folktale (tale 2) the mother of a crippled boy knows that her crippled son cannot be accepted as husband by any woman in society. Afraid “that he would die a bachelor”, she arranges for him to marry a girl whose parents she has managed to convince. She lies to them that her son works far off and has tasked her with finding a wife for him. The circumstances which follow are unfortunate as the girl tries to find out who is constantly supplying meat to her family. When she discovers that this is done by a cripple, who is also meant to be her husband, she carries the drum cage housing of the cripple to her people, lamenting. The whole society was stunned at how a cripple can also have a wife.

The tale depicts the crippled character as an unfortunate human being who has been confined in a drum cage since childhood. This confinement makes him unable to choose a marriage partner for himself. When one is secured for him by his mother, the marriage is only for the purpose of saving him from the social burden of “living and dying a bachelor – a “crime” greatly deplored in this society. The tale therefore, highlights the social sentence society passes on cripples – who are deemed failures who must be excluded from participating in the mainstream of social activities such as marriage. Significant to note is that there is nothing in the tale that questions the

potency of the character. Despite this however, the married couple never live as husband and wife; instead the husband must stay in total hiding as if his ability to perform as a married man is being questioned.

THE HUNCHBACK

In both the Bakossi and Xhosa societies there exists a social hierarchal structure that accords a value system and respect to its members according to certain attributes; including one's physical stature, which usually serves as the starting point for the respect, ridicule or stigma he or she receives. To this Zotwana (1991, 68) writes:

Yiva ke xa kuthethwa ngomntu omde. Kude kube ngathi ubude obu bumenza abe ngoyena mntu apha ebantwini. Zonke iintethwana ezimchazayo zisoloko zaba nokumncoma. Uva kusithiwa into kabana, “ngurhec’izulu, uchul’ukunyathela...

(“Listen to people talking about a tall man. They will make him appear as the most important person who supersedes everything else in this world. Every talk about him will always include positive statements like: “He is so tall that he reaches the sky, his walk is extraordinarily eye-catching...”)

Makuthethwe ngomfitshane!!!! Ngangobuninzi bazo [intethwana ezigxekayo] ungade ucinge ukuba ubufutshane obu sesona sono sakha saba sibi ezonweni apha. Kukho ukuba uve kuthethwa “ngesishunqwana, ungazi ke ngoku nokuba umntu lo angaba sisishunqu njani na. Okanye kuthiwe sisigqigqana...

(“Let them talk about a short one!!!! Their abundance [mocking negative terms] can sometimes influence one to think that to be short is the most sinister sin in the universe. Sometimes you hear people talking “about a person who is HALF HUMAN IMPLYING THAT HE IS A DWARF (*isishunqu* means half of... it could be a stick or anything that could be cut into halves). The author continues and say, “...one may never know how a human being can be described as being half of himself.”)

As if the term is not enough, the *diminutive* -ana at the end of the adjective — *ngesishunqwana* signifies that the person is being underrated.

The calamity of being a hunchback in both societies is very tormenting. In both ordinary conversation and in oral literature forms such as folktales and proverbs, a hunchback is referred to in isiXhosa as *isifombo*. When one wishes to poke fun/humour out of the hunchback's disability, the person will be referred to as *UNogakrana* from the idiom *ukuthi ga*—with the intention of ridiculing the victim, based on her/his stature as the chest is extra ordinarily/unproportionally protruding in all hunchbacks. The -ana at the end of the noun is a diminutive that connotes *INDELELO* (“looking

down upon others//undermining a person”). It is very common to hear a person who finds one in the company of a hunchback saying:

Umchole phi na lo Nogakrana?

(“Where did you pick up this Nogakrana?”), (as if one is talking about a piece of dirt/rag)

The isiXhosa idiom *waqhela ukuqhatha izifombo* (“that prank is for hunchbacks”) attests to the reality that has been referred to in the foregoing discussion that disability is associated with mental deficiency. The implication of the idiom is that such a prank is for “small minds” like hunchbacks. On such insults, Kiyimba (2008, 19) observes that

The use of the image of the hunchback to signify inconvenience and to generate humour without due regard for the feelings of the hunchbacked people in society is the ultimate reflection of insensitivity on the part of society towards the disability.

Some proverbs among the Bakossi use images that suggest that a hunchback is a criminal, therefore making it taboo to have people with hunchbacks in a society; the disability appear a social taboo; as if one had chosen to be born like that. In other words, the images use grim humour to ridicule the victims and suggest that disabled persons are a burden in society. The proverb below, for example, suggests that all possible means should be employed to remove such conditions from society, for instance, “you are as honoured as one who cures a hunchback”. (Emade 2005, 38)

Traditionally, it is believed that many illnesses and conditions; including madness, barrenness and impotence can be cured. For one to be greatly honoured; particularly because she/he can cure hunchback, signifies the urgency of the scheme. Being a hunchback must therefore, be a greatly deplorable condition in this society. Whoever can rid society of this condition is therefore, accorded the status of a hero, who deserves great honour.

SIGHT IMPAIRMENTS

Among the Bakossi and amaXhosa, like in any other society, sight impairment is very common. Often in ordinary conversation, a proverb featuring this subject is used to make a general observation about life; even if not necessarily about visual impairment.

A mbwog eje bad o-be bwe meg, moh aweh wooh deg a hug moh de keng (Bakossi)

(“In the country of the blind a one-eyed person among the blind is King”).

Among the Bakossi and amaXhosa, a totally blind person is useless. It is for this reason that one who at least can use one eye will be respected, glorified and worshipped. The term *impumputhela* (“one who is totally blind) for instance, is used by children when

playing hide and seek. A cloth will be tied over the eyes of the one who will be looking for others in the game, and that one is called *impumputhela* (those who are totally blind). He/she will likely play a leadership role among people who are totally blind. In isiXhosa, the words *imfama/inyhohli/impumputhela* are mostly used to ridicule the person. In most cases a person will be called by one of these terms that depicts one's form of disability rather than using his/her name.

SENSORY AND OTHER FORMS OF DISABILITY

In this section, we analyse the perceptions that become evident in selected proverbs and folktales that feature sensory disabilities such as deafness and dumbness. Some other special forms of disability such as barrenness and impotence, as well as mental impairments are also discussed. While these may necessarily not be impairments afflicting the sensory organs as dumbness and deafness do, they are discussed under this section because they are not physically identifiable. Unless one interacts with the victim, he/she cannot identify the impairment. The plight of one having a sensory impairment in society has for long been existent. Such a person usually receives societal abuses and alienation, ranging from the pejorative nouns and adjectives used to describe him/her such as *ebubeh* ("dumb") in Akoose, to physical seclusion from the rest of the other members in society. Barnes (2008, 7), when discussing the social exclusion of the sensory impaired victims observed that

...certainly ever since the ancient world of Greece and Rome disparate sections of the disabled population have found themselves thrown together whether through choice or otherwise ... this process of exclusion was fundamental to the development of the deaf culture.

This seclusion is still evident today. Many deaf children and those merely perceived by society as being deaf or mentally impaired are confined to separate and unique schools. This seclusion serves to make such people acquire their unique disability cultures, usually manifested in self-withdrawal from the other members of society.

DEAFNESS AND DUMBNESS

The two are identifiably different types of disability; the former being the inability to hear while the latter is a speech impairment. The general belief is that a dumb person is also deaf; hence the two are herein discussed together.

Mod awe kole metuu (ebubeh) e-wonghe edubeh

("A person, who is deaf, has no honour.")

Just like the images in the proverbs on physical disability, the images of deafness and dumbness in the Bakossi proverbs are glaringly stigmatising. They thus serve as a

premise for the view that Bakossi proverbs promote disability unfriendly attitudes. The above proverb is an outright insult and reminder to the victim that he/she cannot fit in the category of those to be honoured. Honour among the Bakossi is accorded to one on the basis of how society perceives him/her. Often, wealthy individuals (*Behon*), chiefs (*keng*) and those who perform distinguished duties such as diviners (*Bade ngang*) are given great honour. Others such as bachelors *and* the barren, among others, are never honoured. The above proverb therefore, suggests that the deaf belong to the latter group. Similarly, the proverb below also expresses the same idea.

Metuu boh huged ne ebubeh ji a sontii (Bakossi)

(“The deaf one will have his/her ears open while in the grave”).

The above proverb suggests a permanent condition of the disability that a person takes with him/her to the grave. The occasion of ears opening up while one is in the grave is useless and irrelevant; for ears that can hear, whether used for hearing or heeding advice, are only useful to the living and not the dead. The tone in the proverb is that of mockery of the deaf, with an ironic hope that their disability will end when they die.

SPECIAL FORMS OF DISABILITY

In many African societies, what is regarded as a disability depends to a great extent, on societal and cultural perceptions of what is regarded as “normal” in that society. The person regarded as normal, therefore has the right to feel superior, while those regarded as disabled have to bear the social tag of the “others” or the “different”. Among the Bakossi, for example, barren women and impotent men are referred to as “others”, because they do not conform to the society’s measure of normal women and men. “Normal” women and men bear children. For the barren women and impotent men, their condition in society is seen as unusual, and they are therefore, often ridiculed; just like the crippled, the deaf and the dumb. The above observation might not be true among amaXhosa, because they do not seem to have impotent men.

BARRENNESS

Sone (2011, 38) opines that “among the Bakossi, barren women, impotent men as well as bachelors are at the base of the social hierarchical structure of recognition.” Usually, these were dismissed as worthless nonstarters in society. Any of these conditions attracted a high degree of stigma, and rigorous cultural rites were performed to cure or remedy the situation. Specifically for the barren women, the “cure” often involved taking a bath with prescribed medicine at road junctions. Even when dead, similar rites were performed to cleanse the family of the curse of a man or woman who died childless or unmarried. Such rites included opening a rear exit of the house, through which the

dead body would be carried as they headed for the burial site. Where a couple failed to have a child in the traditional Bakossi society, the woman was usually seen as being at fault, and therefore, lived a tormented life. This usually made such a woman carry out desperate operations in the “treatment” of her condition, some of them demeaning and dehumanising. All these were done for her to escape the social torment and ridicule, in addition to the desire to have a child. Many Bakossi proverbs are blunt in their ridicule of barren women. Some are directly abusive and ascribing the role of such a woman as that of only eating and defecating:

Moh awe wooh mmwad awe jiah mwan, a wooh ngin' eje a lime ntum (Bakossi)

(“One who marries a barren woman, must be sure of his strength to dig up pit latrines”).

The above proverb warns men about marrying barren women because they eat a lot and fill up pit latrines faster; and therefore, one must have the physical strength to continuously dig up new pit latrines. The proverb insensitively makes fun of the barren woman and suggests that she is responsible for her condition. Another proverb has it that:

Mmwad awe e-jiah mwan ade ne huab awe sede ke hee ngen (Bakossi)

(“A barren woman is a hawk; it lands wherever it feels excited to”)

Society uses these and many more proverbs to perpetuate stereotypical notions about barren women. The barren woman is therefore, a victim of social ridicule and contempt, and her position in society is precarious. The metaphor of the “hawk”, used in the proverb, has negative connotations. The hawk, to which the barren woman is likened is a preying bird, always causing misery and suffering to the hens. If she is a hawk, then the barren woman is equally dangerous to the children of others just as the hawk is to the “children of hens”. Women who have joined the club of motherhood often taunt the barren by describing them in debilitating, abusive terms.

In all, society seems to view barrenness not simply as an unfortunate condition, but as a curse. It is for this reason that Ekwoke (1994, 22) observes that “the proverbs in this society (Bakossi) lend authority to the stereotypical notions and stigma towards the barren.” It is against this background that victims are compelled to engage in activities that are dehumanising and demeaning, in desperate attempts to remedy their situations.

Among traditional amaXhosa, barrenness is associated with women only—men are regarded as “innocent” creatures in this regard. In other words, it is only a woman who becomes an object of ridicule in a situation where a couple is unable to bear children. No man is impotent in traditional amaXhosa culture; thus, it is only the woman who has to receive medical treatment for this condition. Consequently, there is no isiXhosa term for an impotent man. The term *IDLOLO* refers to a barren woman. Such women are often victimised, as reflected by the following sayings:

Inkabi mazibotshwe, nezisendlwini zikhutshwe

(“Oxen should be put to span, even those that are inside the kitchen must be brought out.”)

The term INKABI refers to a bull that has been castrated. This saying is used to inflict severe pain on the woman—as if she is the source of the curse.

Ukuzala kukuzolula—ongazalanga makavale ngayo!!!!

(“To bear a child means stretching oneself—the one who is childless should use IT (the organ through which the child comes) as a door”).

This saying is mostly heard when women are ululating, during a marriage ceremony.

IMPOTENCE

Among the Bakossi, while barrenness is a “curse”, impotence is a “crime” Sone (2011, 54). Every man is under societal obligation to fully sustain an erection and also father children. Anything short of this, is a social offense. Society, therefore, has neither tolerance nor kind words for such an offender, as can be seen in the following proverbs how notions of torment and ridicule of an impotent are articulated:

Moh awe jiege mwan e-lupoh wieh (Bakossi)

(“He who does not have a child can never be fierce”).

Hun ade huwe ati ade ne mmwe mme moh awe hele mmwad dim a heh (Bakossi)

(“It is as quiet as the old homestead of an impotent man”).

The first proverb dismisses the impotent man and any others, who may have no children of his or their own, as never to be considered fierce. As noted above, Bakossi young men aspire to be called fierce by continuously referring to themselves as *ngin-e moh* (“powerful men”). This desire is permanently lurking in their subconscious. Society, however, seems to challenge every man to fulfill this by bearing children. It is only he, who begets children who graduates to being regarded as fierce. The proverb however, does not stop at tormenting the living impotent, rather even the dead. The scorn that society heaps on an impotent man is overwhelming. The “crime” appears so grave that the victim is depicted as a “non-man”, both when alive and when dead.

MENTAL DISABILITIES

Mental disabilities draw similar images in the oral literature of the Bakossi and the Xhosa, just as any other forms of disability discussed above. These are the same images

of the ugly and dislikeable victims in society, serving retribution for their own folly. For this reason, they should therefore, be shunned as the following proverbs suggest:

He who befriends a mad one is doing her/him injustice (Sone 2010, 25)

He who plays sex with a mad one is one to blame (Emade 2005, 18)

Madness does not come without reason -Xhosa (Ibekwe 1998, 45)

Igeza libotshwa kokwalo (Xhosa)

(“A mad one can only be managed by his relatives/those he resides with”).

Andinawo mna amandla egeza (Xhosa)

(“I do not have that energy of mad people”)

Madness is a mental illness that can attack anyone; just like any other illness. The Xhosa proverb above refutes this, suggesting that for every madness, there is always a reason, presumably external. Society seems to believe that one becomes mad either as a result of retribution or one feigns the illness to enable him/her to accomplish a sinister motive nursed for a long time. This meaning becomes apparent in the common contextual usage of the proverb to imply that the act of madness in question is in essence; carefully thought and planned out. The two Bakossi proverbs on the other hand, build images of the mad person as an alienated member of a society; one with whom nobody should have dealings. The proverbs send strong warnings to members of the society to never associate with the mad ones—because in so doing, the member offends him/her. It sounds ridiculous here for this society to appear to defend the mentally disabled, yet consistently proverbs deride disability as seen above. The next isiXhosa proverb however, seems to be in contradiction with societal restriction of association (Ibekwe 1998, 49): “It’s only the one who has undressed him/herself who is mad”.

The proverb highlights a very familiar ground: sometimes apparent acts of madness are not, as echoed by Imbuga (1976, 42): “When the madness of an entire nation disturbs a solitary mind, it is not enough to say the man is mad.” Truly, sometimes, not all those who appear to be mad are really mad. The proverb however, makes a deliberate exaggeration—society seems to challenge one to prove his madness by undressing in public. The proverb therefore, serves to highlight the insensitivity of society to the mentally disabled, challenging them to prove their physically invisible condition of disability. One other dominant image in the oral literature of the Bakossi about mental disability is the harsh and exploitative treatment that society expose victims to. This exploitation is however, executed with impunity; just as the injustice dispensed out on the dumb discussed above. The following proverbs also show recurrent images of madness among the Bakossi:

He, who drums for the mad one to dance, does not help him/her in the dancing. (Ekwoje 1994, 340).

A mad man's dance is entertaining, but none wishes his own to be mad. (Sone 2010, 24).

Both proverbs mentioned above reveal that “normal” members of society enjoy watching the antics of mad people. On many occasions, you find a group of “normal” people gathered round, or even following a nude mad man or women through the streets of towns. Where such a victim does not throw stones, people will even invite him/her to perform antics before them. The proverbs highlight the plight of the mad person in society. Their condition is a serious defect, but other members of the society take advantage of it. There is therefore, no need for one to drum for a mad one since he/she shall not participate in the dance. What is significantly ridiculous in the above proverb is for society to assume that the dancing of a madman is entertaining. In the story below, the exploitative nature of society is highlighted.

In another tale briefly mentioned below, the exploitative nature of the Bakossi society was highlighted. Chief Ollong wants as usual to exploit Ndadiah, the mad man, by making him do the entire work for him with no pay. Ndadiah however, manages to avenge his exploitation by carrying away the chief's clothes when he met the chief taking a bath in the village stream alone. This greatly embarrasses Chief Ollong.

The moral lesson passed on to the listener is that one should not bath at roadsides or public places. Up to this point, the madman appears victorious. But society does not expect this turn of events and therefore, cannot allow a madman to have such a positive contribution. His continuous laughter depicts him as a fool. Furthermore, he is stripped naked to prove that it is him who is in the wrong, and not the “sane” chief.

CONCLUSION

This study discovered and consistently highlighted the stereotypical notions that both the Bakossi and Xhosa communities have towards disabled persons. These are consistently wrapped up in the disability-unfriendly and negative images found in both the content and context of the art pieces sampled. The two communities are generally harsh in dealing with disabled persons. Disabled persons are generally ignored, rejected and dehumanised. The “non-disabled” look at them patronisingly, and with contempt. The disabled persons are therefore, stigmatised and relegated to the social dustbins. Even in children, lasting attitudes towards disabled persons are inculcated early in their life; and their consequent interactions are dependent on these attitudes. We also observe that the transmission act of this grim rejection, prejudicial and dehumanising notions and attitudes against the disabled may not be deliberate and stated out rightly. Rather, they are usually subtle and lurks in the oral literature the Bakossi and amaXhosa use in daily communication. Where the societal world view regarding some conditions is very harsh and judgmental to an extent that the victims seem to be alienated, they develop a

unique disability culture basically “understood” by (them) themselves alone. In many texts, the study also revealed that society considers disability as a form of retribution for the victims.

REFERENCES

- Ann, J. 1982. *Modern Literary Theory: A Comparative Introduction*. London: Batsford Ltd.
- Armstrong, F., and B. Len, eds. 1999. *Disability, Human Rights and Education: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*. Burkingham: Open University.
- Barnes, C. 2008. “Generating Change: Disability, Culture and Art.” *Journal for Disability and International Development* 36(3) 248–58.
- Budaza, G. S. 1989. *Khawufan ’ucinge*. Pietermaritzburg: Shuter & Shooter.
- Burchardt, T. 2004. “Capabilities and Disability: The Capabilities Framework and the Social Model of Disability.” *Disability & Society* 19(7) 735–751. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0968759042000284213>
- Covey, S. R. 1992. *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People. Restoring the Character Ethics*. London: Simon and Schuster.
- Degener, T., and K. Yolán, eds. 1995. *Human Rights and Disabled Persons*. Dordrecht: Martin us Nijoft Publishers.
- Ekwoje, D. 1994. “Bakossi Proverbs: A Case Study in Language and Folklore.” DIPES Dissertation, Yaounde: ENS.
- Emade, S. 2005. “Proverbs as Socio-Cultural Heritage: A Case Study of Bakossi Proverbs.” M.A Dissertation. Yaoundé: University of Yaounde 1.
- Etongue-Mayer, E. J. 2007. *Study on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Cameroon*. Report by AFUB, CNAB, DRPI & SRF. York: York University.
- Gable, S., and S. Peters. 2004. “Presage of a Paradigm Shift? Beyond the Social Model of Disability toward Resistance Theories of Disability.” *Disability & Society* 19(6) 585–600. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0968759042000252515>
- Hendriks, A. 1995. “The significance of Equality and Non Discrimination for the Protection of the Rights and Dignity of Disabled Persons.” In *Human Rights and Disabled Persons*, edited by D. Theresia, and Y. Koster-Dreese. Dordrecht: Martinus Nijjot Publishers.
- Ibekwe, P. 1998. *Wit and Wisdom from Africa: Proverbs from Africa and the Caribbean*. Trenton: Spencer.
- Imbuga, F. 1987. *Betrayal in the City*. Nairobi: Heinmann.
- Kiyimba, A. 2001. “Gender Stereotypes in the Folktales and Proverbs of the Baganda”. PhD Thesis., University of Dar-es-Salaam.

- Marks, D. 1997. "Models of Disability." *Disability and Rehabilitation* 19(3) 85–91. <https://doi.org/10.3109/09638289709166831>
- Marks, D. 1999. *Disability: Controversial Debates and Psychosocial Perspectives*. London: Routledge.
- Naicker, S. M. 2000. *From Apartheid Education to Inclusive Education: The Challenges of Transformation*. Paper Presented at the International Education Summit for a Democratic Society, 26 – 28 June Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State University.
- Oliver, M. 1990. *The Politics of Disablement*. Basingstoke: Macmillan and St Martin's Press. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-20895-1>
- Republic of Cameroon. 1996. *The Constitution of the Republic of Cameroon*. Yaounde: Government Publications.
- Republic of South Africa. 1996. *The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa*. Pretoria: Government Printer.
- Republic of South Africa. 2000. *Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act (Act No 4 of 2000)*. Pretoria: Government Printer.
- Richardson, I. 1957. *Linguistic Survey of Northern Bantu Borderland, Vol.11*. London: International African Institute.
- Shakespeare, T., and N. Watson. 1997. "Defending the Social Model." *Disability & Society* 12(2) 293–300. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599727380>
- Smyke, Patricia. 1991. *Women with Disabilities*. United States of America: Zed.
- Sone, E. M. 2010. "A Collection of Bakossi Proverbs." Manuscript.
- Sone, E. M. 2011. "Symbolism of the Mountain in Bakossi-Cameroon Mythology." PhD Thesis., University of KwaZulu-Natal.
- Zotwana, Z. S. 1991. *Imfincamfincane*. Johannesburg: Via Afrika Ltd.
- United Nations. 2006. *The Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (CRPD)*. New York: United Nations Organisation.