Chapter 5: Mohlomi's Indigenous Knowledge System as a Tool to Decolonise the Basotho: The *Botho* Perspective

Johannes Seema

Introduction

Chief Mohlomi was a revered traditional leader and healer among the Basotho in the eighteenth century. He was the son of Monyane and the great-grandson of Monaheng, king of the Bakwena. His elder brother was Nkopane, and his wife was Mmaliepollo. Mohlomi is remembered as a visionary thinker, spiritual guide and rainmaker whose influence shaped Basotho values for generations. As a young man, Mohlomi was initiated into the customs and traditions of the Bakwena tribe in the Tebang village, a process described in various historical and literary sources. These include *Moshweshwe Moshwaila* by Mopeli-Paulus (1976), *Morena Mohlomi mora Monyane* by Guma (1960) and *Histori ea Basotho* by Ellenberger (1988). These accounts depict Mohlomi as a young initiate under the guidance of his father, Monyane, who passed on the cultural and leadership wisdom of their people.

Mohlomi travelled widely across Southern Africa and neighbouring regions, where he healed people and spread a message of peace. He became a renowned medicine-man and traditional healer, possessing advanced knowledge of medicinal plants and herbs, as well as cures for various ailments. Mohlomi was also known to have the ability to bring about rainfall.

As Ellenberger (1988: 94) notes: *'Bitso la hae le ne le tumile; esita le balepera o ne a ba fodisa'* (His name was famous; he could even cure those suffering from leprosy). Mohlomi's deep understanding of traditional medicines played a vital role in preserving many Basotho healing practices from being lost. Succeeding his father, Monyane, Mohlomi emerged as a unifier of the Basotho, who had been divided. Mohlomi also succeeded his

father, Monyane, as chief in accordance with the customs of the Bakwena clan. Mohlomi emerged as a unifying figure among the Basotho, who had been politically and socially divided. The family resided in Ngoliloe, a settlement that predated the arrival of Christian missionaries in Lesotho in 1833.

To understand Mohlomi's lineage and his significance in Basotho history, it is important to introduce the Bakwena, the clan into which he was born. The Bakwena is one of the major clans of the Basotho people. Their totem, *Kwena* (crocodile), plays a vital cultural role in affirming clan identity, establishing kinship ties and guiding traditional leadership succession.

A key episode in the history of the Bakwena clan helps to explain the divided state of the community that Mohlomi would later work to unify. This division dates back to the time of Chief Monaheng, Mohlomi's grandfather. According to Bakwena custom, when the queen gave birth to twins, tradition dictated that only one of the children could survive, while the other had to be sacrificed. The queen defied this law and fought to protect both her sons, leading to tensions within the village. Some supported adherence to traditional law, while others sympathised with the queen. Eventually, one twin, Mokgeseng, was killed in battle. The other, Monyane, survived and later fathered Mohlomi.

This moment in history not only highlights the internal conflicts that shaped Mohlomi's heritage, it also foreshadows his future role as a unifier and reconciler of divided communities. Raised with deep knowledge of Basotho beliefs and political structures—and believed to be gifted with the ability to commune with the ancestors—Mohlomi would later emerge as a leader deeply committed to peace and unity.

Mohlomi lived in the pre-colonial era, long before the onset of European colonisation in Southern Africa. According to Ellenberger (1988), Mohlomi passed away in 1842. Cultural practices such as the killing of one twin—highlighted earlier—originated during this earlier period and were not a result of colonial influence.

The aim of this chapter is to explore Mohlomi's indigenous knowledge systems—both those rooted in his use of medicinal herbs and those embedded in his teachings on *Botho* and reconciliation—as a means of

decolonising the Basotho. Finally, the chapter seeks to answer the question: Why is the life of Africans, and the Basotho in particular, no longer guided by the philosophy of *Botho*?

The study method

This study takes the form of a textual analysis. Data will be collected from two main sources: Guma's novel *Morena Mohlomi mora Monyane* (1960) and Mopeli-Paulus's novel *Moshweshwe Moshwaila* (1976), along with a range of secondary sources.

Botho values

In this chapter, the terms *Botho* and *Ubuntu* will be used interchangeably, as both concepts refer to the same idea—humanity. *Botho* is a Sesotho term, while *Ubuntu* originates from isiZulu.

It is important to highlight that the concept *Botho* can be defined from different angles and perspectives. This means that there is no single, universally accepted definition of *Botho* in literature. In this chapter, *Botho* will be examined through the lens of five core values identified by Mbigi (1997), while also considering the views of other scholars. As cited in Nxumalo and Mncube (2019), Mbigi outlines five values embedded in *Botho*: survival; the spirit of solidarity; respect; compassion and dignity.

According to Hornby (2010: 1491), survival means 'the state of continuing to live or exist, often despite difficulty or danger'. During the *Difaqane* wars, Africans—and the Basotho in particular—suffered greatly. They were displaced, impoverished and deprived of basic resources. Epprecht (1994) notes that these wars, which lasted from approximately 1810 to 1840, were triggered by widespread famine and competition over scarce resources. In the face of hardship, Africans—the Basotho in particular—relied on mutual assistance to survive. As Du Toit *et al.* (2006) argue, poverty and displacement compelled people to depend on one another, thereby strengthening communal bonds.

The Basotho endured the hardships of the *Difaqane* and other wars largely through the values of *Botho*, relying on each other for survival.

The spirit of solidarity is reflected in the Basotho proverb *ntjapedi ha e hlolwe ke sebata*, meaning that when people work together, they can overcome or defeat challenges such as poverty. Hornby (2010: 1403) defines solidarity as the 'support by one person or group of people for another because they share feelings, opinions and aims'. Among the Basotho, mutual support is expressed through open communication and shared experiences. For example, when someone has no food, they can ask their neighbours for help—and help will be given. Nxumalo and Mncube (2019: 107) assert that 'compassion promotes feelings of belonging and interconnectedness observed in African communities'.

The Basotho is characterised by *tlhompho*—"respect". According to Nxumalo and Mncube (2019: 107), 'in African communities, if one wants to achieve successful engagement with members of the community, respect and dignity are the requirements'. Among the Basotho, respect is deeply rooted in proverbs such as *Mosadi ke morena*—"A woman is a king"—which expresses that women are respected by all, even by the king. Another proverb, *Mosadi ha a na morena*—"A woman has no king"—suggests that, on some occasions, only a woman may challenge the power and authority of a king.

The philosophy of *Botho* as the theoretical framework of the study

The concept of *Botho* is expressed in the Sesotho proverb *Motho ke motho ka batho ba bang*, which translates as "a person is a person through other persons". This means 'to be a human being is to affirm one's humanity by recognising the humanity of others and, on that basis, establish humane relations with them' (Naicker 2015: 3). In Sesotho, this proverb emphasises the idea that a person's worth is realised through their interconnectedness with others.

Botho is a broad concept, and scholars have not reached a single, universally accepted definition of what it entails. Some believe that *Botho* qualifies as a philosophy, while others argue that it does not. Due to the range of meanings associated with *Botho*, Bhengu (2006) asserts that it is difficult to translate the concept into English. Similarly, Mokgoro (1998: 1)

observes that *Botho* is generally translated as 'humanness', while Maqutu (2018) supports Bhengu's view by emphasising that there is no exact English equivalent for *Botho*.

Some scholars define *Botho* as a worldview, while others argue that it is indeed a fully formed philosophy. Hountondji (1996), for example, contends that African philosophy can only exist in written form. This argument, however, overlooks the fact that the absence of writing in many African societies was not due to a lack of intellectual tradition, rather a different mode of preserving and transmitting knowledge.

Africans had a rich oral tradition that included songs, proverbs, folklore and oral poetry. These forms of expression were passed down from generation to generation and formed a cohesive body of indigenous knowledge. While these traditions were not originally recorded in written form, they were later recognised by scholars as oral "literature". The fact that these ideas were not documented according to Western standards should not undermine the philosophical value of *Botho* when viewed through an African lens.

Botho as a worldview is well expressed by Ngcoya (2009: 1), who writes: '*Ubuntu* stresses the importance of community, solidarity, caring, and sharing. This worldview [*ubuntu*] advocates a profound sense of interdependence and emphasizes that our true human potential can only be realized in partnership with others.'

Ngcoya's notion that *Botho* is a worldview is supported by other scholars. One such scholar is Murove (2014), who also regards *Botho* as a worldview. Murove (2014: 37) writes: 'Since *Ubuntu* is based on a worldview, a relationality, its main insight is consequently based on the idea that as human beings we depend on other human beings to attain ultimate well-being.'

Mbiti (1969: 96) explains the traditional way of life of Africans as follows:

> In traditional life, the individual does not and cannot exist alone except corporately. He owes his existence to people, including those of past generations and his contemporaries. He is simply part of the whole. The community must therefore make, create, or produce the individual; for

> the individual depends on the corporate group... Whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual.

Mbiti's (1969) well-known statement 'I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am' (106) encapsulates the view that *Botho* is indeed a philosophy. He argues that a person cannot exist in isolation; their strength and identity are derived from their relationship with other people. This idea is echoed in King Moshweshwe's statement: 'Man is only alone as long as he remains in his mother's womb; when he sees the light of the day he clings to the breast of her who has given birth, and from that time he lives in the society of his fellows' (Krog 2009: 107-108). A person is never truly alone—even in the womb, a child is with the mother.

Tutu (1999) views *Botho* as a philosophy of human interconnectedness and argues that those who lack *Botho*—by oppressing others—are themselves victims of their oppressive actions, just like those they harm. He expresses his ideas as follows:

> *Ubuntu* means that in a real sense even the supporters of apartheid were victims of the vicious system which they implemented and which they supported so enthusiastically. Our humanity was intertwined. The humanity of the perpetrator of apartheid's atrocities was caught up and bound up in that of his victim whether he liked it or not. In the process of dehumanizing another, in inflicting untold harm and suffering, the perpetrator was inexorably being dehumanized as well (Tutu 1999: 35).

Tutu's reflections affirm *Botho* as a philosophy. His views are supported by Gade (2012: 487), who describes *Botho* as 'a philosophy or an African ethic, …according to which persons are interconnected'.

Sibanda (2019: 19) makes the following observation regarding the views of other scholars: 'The fact that scholars like Van Binsbergen (2001) are dismissive of *Ubuntu* as an authentic Southern African philosophy of being, vindicates those like Chilisa (2012), Banks (1992), and Asante (1991) who have challenged African scholars to be Afrocentric in their research philosophy.'

Sibanda (2019), in defence of Afrocentric scholarship, urges African scholars to value *Botho* as a valid philosophical tradition. The current chapter supports this call and acknowledges that *Botho* may be both a worldview and a philosophy. These perspectives are not mutually exclusive—rather, they offer complementary understandings of *Botho's* scope and meaning.

My position regarding the perspectives of scholars who argue that *Botho* is a worldview and those who claim it is a philosophy, is that both views are valid. While one can distinguish between the two, the essential meaning of *Botho* remains intact and should not be distorted. This means that even though authors can have different views about *Botho*, the meaning of *Botho* cannot change.

Botho is a perspective that strives for ethical perfection. This means that *Botho* is about loving and tolerating other people. There can be no *Botho* without *Motho* (a person). *Botho* represents "the spirit in dust", signifying that to be human is to be an extension of the presence of God. This means that right from birth, a person possesses *Botho.* Being human means embodying and expressing the power of God. As Ramaboea (2018: 14) asserts: 'We can change many things in life, but we shouldn't interfere with Ubuntu.'

Botho encompasses values such as love, respect, tolerance and empathy. It emphasises respect for elders, respect for women, hospitality towards other people and goodwill towards all kinds of people. At its core, *Botho* is based on interdependence. This view is reflected in proverbs such as *Matsoho a hlatswana* (Mutual help). For people to prosper, they must support one another. Another well-known proverb, *Kopano ke matla* (Unity is the strength) encapsulates this worldview. These proverbs embody the collective wisdom and resourcefulness essential to the development of the community.

Campbell (2012), as cited in Mutembei (2014: 338), states that: 'The African philosophy of *Ubuntu* emphasizes linked humanity and our intrinsic connection with a complex universe. *Ubuntu* opens a space for us to understand how different parts of the universe fit together, with an understanding that 'everything is connected to everything else.'

Although Van der Walt (1997) discusses the differences between the Western worldview—which is generally individualistic—and the

African worldview—which is collectivist, *Botho* manages to embrace both perspectives, since both recognise the presence and dignity of human beings. The main distinction lies in how life is lived and valued within each tradition.

Samkange and Samkange (1980: 38–39) reflect on the meaning of *Botho* as follows:

> We know also, it [*Ubuntu*] means more than just a person, human being, or humanness because when one sees two people, one white and the other black, coming along, we say, 'Hona munhu uyo ari kufamba nomurungu' or in isiNdebele, 'Nanguyana umuntu ohamba lo mlungu' (There is a muntu/munhu walking with a white man). Now, is there a sense in which we can say a white man lacks something which we always identify in an African? Yes, black Americans, for instance, identify something they call 'soul' as being almost exclusively among black folk … Why? Perhaps because of the unique experience the black American has had passing through a particular brand of slavery: North American slavery.

Mutembei (2014: 347) argues that 'humanity in Africa through the Ubuntu philosophy will only be realised through African languages'. Sibanda (2019: 54) appears to support this view when reflecting on the proverb *Motho ke motho ka batho ba bang / Umuntu, ngumuntu ngabantu*: 'This proverb has been part of the Bantu languages since time immemorial, and unless there is another meaning to it, other than that associated with Ubuntu philosophy, it has not been revealed.'

However, the claims made by both Mutembei and Sibanda can be challenged. The philosophy of *Botho* or *Ubuntu* is not confined to language alone, but is fundamentally expressed through the lived experience of collective life, social interconnectedness and engagement with the spiritual world. *Botho* or *Ubuntu* transcends race, colour and language, because it is rooted in the shared essence of humanity.

As a way of life, *Botho* stands in opposition to inhumanity. Its values are reflected in friendliness, hospitality, helpfulness, compassion and empathy towards other people—universal human attributes that speak to our common moral fabric.

Decolonising strategy

The previous sections have explored the philosophy of *Botho* as embedded in the teachings of Mohlomi. In this section, the focus shifts to how these teachings can be viewed as part of a decolonising strategy for the Basotho.

To understand the significance of the cultural dislocations experienced by Africans during colonisation, it is necessary to consider the historical context prior to the "scramble" for Africa, which began in 1884. Before this period, African societies were largely shaped by collectivist worldviews and strong communal values. Life was centred around shared responsibilities, interconnectedness with the natural and spiritual world and interdependence within the community.

As Grieve and Van Deventer (2005: 202) explain, 'this African worldview implies that people are not separate from the cosmos, which includes the spiritual world, nature and living things, and the community in which they live'.

Colonialism disrupted these worldviews. African communities were compelled to abandon their indigenous systems and adopt individualistic Western lifestyles and values. The long-term consequence of this cultural upheaval is what W.E.B. Du Bois, in Butledge (2003: 1) calls 'double consciousness'—a condition in which individuals, particularly Blacks, live with split identities, partly shaped by their original culture and partly shaped by the norms and values of the colonisers. This fractured sense of self has distanced many Africans from the foundational principles of *Botho*, such as respect, honesty, compassion and forgiveness. Green (2005: 322) states that 'Western individualism emphasizes individual autonomy, self-reliance, and personal achievement over collective goals.'

In this chapter, the argument is that Africans—and the Basotho in particular—can be taught *Ubuntu* values through Mohlomi's perspective to decolonise themselves from their double consciousness. In this chapter, the researcher aligns with Chilisa (2012) in analysing the concept of *decolonisation*. Chilisa (2012), as cited in Nxumalo and Mncube (2019), outlines five stages that are useful in the decolonisation process: rediscovery; recovery of mourning; dreaming; commitment and action.

During colonisation, the history, culture and identity of Africans were

distorted and devalued, as the coloniser regarded them as inferior. As a result, Africans came to live a "double life", simultaneously adopting elements of European lifestyles, while attempting to preserve aspects of their Indigenous cultures.

The stages of **rediscovery** and **recovery** encourage Africans to view themselves through the lens of their own Indigenous histories, cultures and identities. These stages promote self-worth, equality and dignity. The **mourning** stage involves reflecting on and lamenting the injustices experienced during colonisation, while also recognising the need to reclaim dignity and respect. **Dreaming** is the stage at which individuals and communities envision new ways of living—such as embracing their Indigenous languages and taking pride in them.

According to Amusa *et al*. (1999), as cited in Nxumalo and Mncube (2019), the final stage—**commitment and action**—involves turning these dreams into tangible strategies for social transformation. At this stage, Africans, and the Basotho in particular, commit themselves to decolonising their minds by embracing their languages, cultures and spiritual traditions with renewed pride and confidence.

Mohlomi and his reign

Building on the decolonisation strategy discussed above, this section introduces Chief Mohlomi as a pivotal figure whose leadership model embodied the values of *Botho*. His reign offers a powerful historical case study of how indigenous philosophy can guide ethical governance, social harmony and community-building—core components of decolonisation.

The practice of initiation into adulthood was a deeply rooted Basotho tradition. The circumcision hut (*lebollo*) was typically constructed from grass and situated in the *veld* (bush land), far from the village. It was in this secluded space, during his own initiation at the age of thirteen, that Mohlomi experienced a vision that would shape his life's mission. His wife, Mmaliepollo, recounted the experience to the missionary Eugene Casalis Arbousset.

Monna wa ka o ne a e na le kopano le badimo. O ne a atisa ho mpolella

> *hore ha a le dilemo tse leshome le tharo, a le mophatong, bosiu ha thaka tsa hae di robetse, o ile a bona morulelo wa ntlo o phetleha mme a nkelwa mahodimong, moo a ileng a hlahiswa pela letshwele la batho, mme yaba o laelwa hore, 'Tsamaya, o buse batho ka lerato, mme o nke e mong le e mong jwalo ka ngwana weno feela.' A kgutla pelo ya hae e le tshweu jwalo ka lehlwa, a itlama hore o fela a tla phetha tseo a di laetsweng.* (Mopeli-Paulus 1976: 50).
>
> My husband had a relationship with the ancestors. He often told me that when he was thirteen years old, in the circumcision hut, during the night when his age peers were asleep, he saw the roof of the house open and he was taken up into the heavens where he was introduced before a great multitude of the people, then he was instructed, 'Go and reign the people with love, and view each and every one as your brother and sister.' He came back with a heart as white as the snow, he bound himself to doing what he had been told to do.

Mohlomi adopted his philosophy of *Botho* from his ancestors. He envisioned Lesotho as a beautiful land, well suited for love and peace—not for war and famine—but rather a country of abundance and prosperity. Mohlomi began his reign by building his nation into a unified and strong community, comparing it to a tightly bound bundle of wood. He did not achieve this through violence or coercion, rather by teaching his people the value of peaceful coexistence (Guma 1960). Mohlomi envisioned a nation rooted in harmony and compassion. One of his most significant sayings was: *Ho ka ba molemo, hore motho a pole mabele, ho na le hore a leoletse mohahabo lerumo* (Mopeli-Paulus 1976: 54) (It is better for a person to thresh sorghum than to sharpen a spear against his brother). Through such teachings, Mohlomi urged his people to abandon conflict and embrace peace and unity in their daily lives.

The philosophy of *Botho* and reconciliation

Peete was Lepoqo's grandfather, and he wanted his grandson, Lepoqo, to grow into a great chief—one who would be respected by all. He brought

Lepoqo to Mohlomi, asking him to strengthen the boy through traditional medicine. Peete said to Mohlomi:

> *Ke o kopa hore we hle, mpe o be mohau Mokwena ho mo beha tlhaka ya ho mo tiisa a tle a be seriti, a hlomphehe* (Mopeli-Paulus 1976: 8).
>
> Please Mokwena, I ask you to have mercy and inflict a ritual scar on him that will strengthen him so that he can have dignity and be respected.

Peete hoped that Lepoqo would become a noble and honourable man and believed that Mohlomi could empower him through traditional fortification. However, it was during this encounter that Mohlomi chose instead to demonstrate his philosophy of *Botho*.

Although Mohlomi possessed extensive indigenous knowledge of Basotho medicinal practices, he taught that there is no medicine that can make a person a great chief. Rather than fortify Lepoqo with herbs, he said:

> *Nka lerumo lena le thebe ena… o pheme hore o se ke wa tsholla madi a motho ka lerumo lena… Lesale lena, ke lesale la puso. O tla le rwala tsebeng ya hao ka ho sa feleng, mohla o ka le rolang, e tla be o rotse puso …* (Mopeli-Paulus 1976: 9).
>
> Take this spear and this shield…do not spill a person's blood with this spear. This earring is the earring of sovereignty. You will wear it in your ear forever, the day you take it off, it will be the day you will be abdicating from your reign …

Through this symbolic gesture, Mohlomi emphasised that leadership is not granted by medicine, but by character. A chief's strength lies in his heart. His advice to Lepoqo and Peete was simple, yet profound: *Pelo ke motho* (The heart is the person). This proverb encapsulates the core of his *Botho* philosophy, a true leader must possess compassion, integrity and humanity.

Nkopane was Mohlomi's elder brother, yet it was Mohlomi who assumed leadership. Curious about this, Lepoqo asked how it was possible for Mohlomi to become chief while his older brother was still alive. Mohlomi

responded: *'Motse ha o na sehlare: sehlare ke pelo…'* (Mopeli-Paulus, 1976: 10) (The village has no medicine; the heart is the medicine). This means that Nkopane did not lead with compassion or strive for the peace and prosperity of his people, hence, he failed to become their chief.

At that time, many Basotho chiefs believed that chieftaincy could be secured through traditional medicine, instilling fear in their subjects. Even Peete believed that if Lepoqo were ritually scarified, it would empower him to become a great chief. Mohlomi, however, rejected this belief. He taught that: *Morena ke sefate se dulwang ke dinonyana tsohle* (A chief is like a tree upon which all birds come to rest). This proverb, central to Mohlomi's philosophy, captures the essence of *Botho*: leadership is not achieved through fear or ritual, rather through respect, kindness and a compassionate heart.

Lepoqo adopted the name *Moshweshwe* immediately after capturing Ramonaheng's cattle. Mohlomi served as a moral compass and role model for Moshweshwe, who lived according to Mohlomi's advice and philosophy. Following the capture of Ramonaheng's cattle, Moshweshwe composed the following oral praise poem:

Ke nna Moshweshwe Moshwashwaila wa ha Kadi
Lebeola le beotseng Ramonaheng ditedu;
Le ho hola ha di eso hole,
Di ya sala di hola maisao (Guma 1983: 152).
I am Moshweshwe, Moshwashwaila of Kadi's (house),
The barber who shaved off Ramonaheng's beard;
Even to grow it has not grown yet,
It will remain growing in years to come.

In this poem, Moshweshwe metaphorically likens himself to a barber—one who removes a beard, not a warrior who sheds blood. Ramonaheng provoked Moshweshwe. Moshweshwe captured Ramonaheng and took a portion of his cattle without resorting to violence. The message embedded in the poem is a call to other chiefs to adopt similar restraint and wisdom when provoked. It serves as a lesson that war is not the only means of resolution.

Furthermore, after the incident, Moshweshwe returned some of the cattle he had taken. This act of generosity was a gesture of *Botho* and reconciliation, illustrating a spirit of goodwill rather than selfishness and greed—despite his victory over Ramonaheng.

Moshweshwe's philosophy of *Botho* and reconciliation

Moshweshwe's leadership did not merely reflect inherited customs—it was a conscious embodiment of the philosophy of *Botho* instilled in him by Mohlomi. This philosophy would be tested and revealed most clearly during times of national crisis, especially during the *Difaqane*.

According to Mopeli-Paulus (1976: 34), *Lentswe lena 'difaqane' ha se puo ya Sesotho, ke lentswe la Setebele le bolelang ho falla, ho balehela tsietsi tsa ntwa*. (This word *difaqane* is not Sesotho language, it is an isiNdebele word that means to flee from the troubles of war.)

During the *Difaqane* wars, many people fled their homesteads, and the region was struck by severe famine. The chaos and displacement caused by these wars led Moshweshwe to relocate his people from *Botha Bothe* to *Thaba Bosiu*. On this journey, Peete—due to his old age and slow pace—was caught by cannibals. Tragically, they killed and consumed him.

After some time, Moshweshwe's people captured the cannibals and brought them before him. They expected the chief to avenge the death of his grandfather, Peete, by executing the culprits. However, Moshweshwe addressed both his people and the cannibals with the following words:

> *Banna ba heso, batho bana bao e leng madimo kajeno ba ka pele ho nna le lona, ba entse hoo hobane ba ne ba kgannwa ke lephako… ba bile ba ikentse lebitla la ntatemoholo. Ho ba tlepetsa ka majwe, le ho ba hlaba ka marumo, kapa hona ho ba utlwisa bohloko bofe kapa bofe ho ke ke ha re thusa letho* (Mopeli-Paulus 1976: 28).
>
> My fellowmen, these people who are cannibals today, these who are in front of me and you now did that because they were driven by hunger… they also made themselves my grandfather's grave. Crushing them with

> stones and stabbing them with spears or even to make them feel pain of any kind, that won't help us.

Moshweshwe remained true to his character and upheld the values instilled in him by Mohlomi, who had advised him never to kill another person with his spear. His address to both his people and the cannibals had the tone and weight of a ceremonial moment. Many of his people, especially the men, expected him to command the execution of the cannibals who had eaten his grandfather. Moshweshwe, however, reframed the event: the death of his grandfather was not to be seen as murder, rather as a sacrifice. He viewed his grandfather's blood of as a symbol of purification. Through his words, Moshweshwe brought healing—not only to the cannibals, but also to his own people. In doing so, he gave full expression to the philosophy of *Botho*.

Mohlomi advised Moshweshwe with the following words: '*…ha o ahlola, o ahlole ka nnete*' (Mopeli-Paulus 1976: 56) (…when you judge, judge honestly). These words remained engraved in Moshweshwe's mind for the rest of his life. He believed that the wrongs committed by the cannibals could not be corrected by committing another wrong. Instead, doing what was right led to their reintegration and acceptance into the community, as they were also part of it.

According to Moshweshwe, individuals such as the cannibals—whose autonomy had been diminished—deserved protection. *Botho* embraces the principle of beneficence, which means that one should strive to do good and above all, avoid causing harm to others. Moshweshwe went to great lengths to protect the cannibals from punishment and harm. He even allocated land to them for settlement and cultivation, ensuring they had access to food and stability. For Moshweshwe, it would have been unethical to kill the cannibals, as doing so would have contradicted both Mohlomi's counsel and the philosophy of *Botho*.

Through his actions, Moshweshwe demonstrated the ethical values of *Botho*, especially generosity of spirit and compassionate action. He recognised that even the cannibals were rightful beneficiaries of the land and part of the Basotho nation. As Prozesky affirms (2018: 3):

> There is no other way to ensure that all our people are respected,

> understood, appreciated and helped as fully as possible, as together we create a new and lasting better future about the land.

Moshweshwe understood the painful situation in which the cannibals found themselves, and he demonstrated a willingness to view them not as enemies to be destroyed, but as partners in the rebuilding of Lesotho. The cannibals, having been dispossessed of their homes, had descended into a state of desperation and marginalisation, resembling a condition closer to that of animals than integrated members of society. Moshweshwe took the deliberate step of reintegrating them into the community.

He sought to uphold the foundational Basotho moral principle of *tlhompho* (respect) as a guiding value in his leadership, especially in matters of justice and reconciliation. By choosing not to retaliate, Moshweshwe replaced inhumanity with *Botho*, the ethic of humaneness, rather than responding to one injustice with another.

Tjhaka and Moshweshwe

While Moshweshwe was reigning from the mountain stronghold of *Thaba Bosiu*, rumours began to circulate that Tjhaka, the powerful King of the AmaZulu, was preparing to attack the Basotho. In response, Moshweshwe sent Makwanyane, along with others, to deliver gifts to Tjhaka—fattened oxen and ostrich feathers—as a gesture of goodwill. He instructed them with the following words:

> *Tsamayang le nehele morena Tjhaka, dimpho tsena, le re ho yena … a nne a hopole hore mane hole, ho na le e mong wa bana babo ya ratang kgotso ka mehla…* (Mopeli-Paulus 1976: 37). Go and give these gifts to King Tjhaka, and tell him to keep on remembering that there beyond, there is one of his brothers who likes peace every day…

Even before Tjhaka could launch an attack, Moshweshwe had chosen the path of peace. Guided by *Botho*, Moshweshwe demonstrated to Tjhaka that cooperation and unity were superior to conflict. In this encounter, Tjhaka benefited from Moshweshwe's prosocial behaviour. According to

Grieve and Van Deventer (2005: 140), 'prosocial behaviour is behaviour in which one person benefits from another's actions'. Moshweshwe's actions modelled the ethic of moral leadership and peaceful reconciliation. He conveyed to Tjhaka that leadership should not be grounded in violence, rather in moral responsibility.

Moshweshwe's leadership style is exemplified in Khoza's (2006: 28) words:

> Leadership through *Ubuntu* has a wide developmental scope that can apply in any society, which aims to promote and sustain economic growth for the sake of an improved quality of life for all.

Through *Botho,* Moshweshwe promoted African humanism, which fosters social cohesion. Swanepoel (1983: 1) describes him as 'a wise and devoted diplomat', who ruled his country for nearly half a century, protecting both his people and foreigners. Ramaboea (2018: 14) affirms: 'We need to look deep into ourselves and unleash the spirit of *Ubuntu*. We will live a peaceful life if we have *Ubuntu*.'

Lesotho remains home to different cultural and ethnic groups, and Moshweshwe's inclusive approach to leadership set a precedent for national unity. He welcomed people who had fled from their kings and offered them refuge. As Krog (2009: 32) notes: 'As a form of conflict prevention, Moshweshwe allowed groups with different cultures, such as Amahlapo from Natal and the Amavundle from the Eastern Cape, to keep their language and to practise their culture.'

Moshweshwe aspired to see joy on the faces of the people of Lesotho, believing that community well-being instils a shared sense of responsibility for the country's future.

The parallels between Mohlomi and Moshweshwe

Moshweshwe, like Mohlomi, opposed the practice of witchcraft and rejected traditional healers who claimed they could identify witches through supernatural means. Ellenberger (1988: 94) notes the following about Mohlomi:

> *O ne a sa re letho ka ditaola, mme o ne a soma ba hangata ba thetsang ka tsona jwalo ka hoja di na le nnete.*
>
> He was not impressed by divining bones, he often ridiculed those who lied when using divining bones as though they possessed the truth.

Similarly, Krog (2009: 28) writes of Moshweshwe: 'When his followers stoned to death a woman accused of being a witch, a very upset king called them together and reprimanded them.'

Both Mohlomi and Moshweshwe also demonstrated their commitment to peace by assisting young men who could not afford *bohadi* (bride wealth). In such cases, the children born from these marriages were regarded as belonging to the person who had paid the *bohadi*, reflected in the Sesotho saying: *Ngwana ke wa habo dikgomo* (The child born from such marriage belongs to the person who paid *bohadi* – the dowry).

The death of Monyane

Mohlomi once advised his father, Monyane, against waging war against other nations. On the day Monyane conspired with Ramokhele and Lijane to attack Lihoja, his son Mohlomi warned him not to proceed:

> *Ntate, ha ke dutse bosiu, ke sa robala, ke ile ka lora, mme torong ya ka ka bona batho ba bararo ba shweleng. Ke a o rapela ke hona, o se ke wa ya tswela pele tabeng eo. Oho, ntate tlohela morero oo!* (Ellenberger 1988: 93).
>
> Father, during the night when I was sitting and awake, I had a dream, and in my dream, I saw three people who had died. I therefore pray you, do not proceed with that plan. Oh, father leave off that plan.

But his father mocked him, saying: *Kgutsa ngwanana towe! Tsamaya, o ye ho kga metsi le banana ba bang!* (Be quiet you girl! Go and fetch water with other girls!) (Ellenberger 1988: 93).

Monyane belittled Mohlomi as weak and cowardly, likening him to

a girl, because in their culture, girls did not go to war, but fetched water. Unlike Moshweshwe, Monyane failed to heed the wisdom of Mohlomi's philosophy, encapsulated in the Sesotho proverb: *Motse ho ahwa wa morapedi* (A village is built by a peacemaker). As a result, Monyane was killed. Moshweshwe, by contrast, lived by Mohlomi's teachings and spared the lives of the cannibals.

Mohlomi's indigenous knowledge is also captured in the proverb: *Morena ke morena ka batho* (A chief is only a chief through his people). This proverb reminds us that leaders must love, respect and protect their people. Moshweshwe's reign was firmly grounded in the philosophy of *Botho* and reconciliation.

Before his death, Mohlomi had another vision—this time of the colonial invasion. He told his wife, Mmaliepollo:

> *Ke ne ke ratile ho ka le tlosa mona, ke le ife moo le tla bolokeha teng hobane ke bona lerole le lefubedu le etla ka matla a maholo ho tswa Botjhabela ho tla kwano. Le tla re ripitla, re ripitlehe* (Guma 1960: 140).
>
> I had wished to move you from here and take you to a safe place because I see the red dust coming here with strong force from the East. It will crush us – we will be crushed.

Mohlomi foresaw that the philosophy he had taught the Basotho would be crushed by the arrival of European colonists. His spirit of *Botho*—which taught love and hospitality, even towards strangers—influenced many Africans to welcome foreigners with kindness. When the Europeans arrived at the Cape, they were met with generosity. Tragically, this kindness may have been Africa's greatest mistake: the strangers took advantage of it and began to treat Africans as inferior, ultimately reducing them to servitude and slavery.

Conclusion

Mohlomi is remembered by the Basotho not merely as a leader, but as a moral teacher whose philosophy of *Botho* and reconciliation served as a

foundation for social harmony and ethical leadership. His guidance shaped how leadership was understood—not as domination, but as service to the people. This is reflected in the Sesotho proverb: *Morena ke morena ka batho* (A chief is a chief because of the people). Through his teachings and his example, Mohlomi cultivated the values of compassion, respect and interdependence, which later guided Moshweshwe in his nation-building efforts.

The spirit of *Botho*, as demonstrated by both Mohlomi and Moshweshwe, prioritised human dignity and communal well-being over conquest or personal gain. While such values have not entirely disappeared, they are under pressure in today's society, where poverty, inequality and individualism often overshadow communal bonds. The observation that *Botho* is fading is not a rejection of its presence, but a reflection of how modern systems—economic, political and cultural—frequently undermine it.

This chapter has argued that Mohlomi's philosophy remains relevant as both a cultural memory and a moral compass. His legacy suggests that the well-being of a nation is closely tied to the values it upholds. While it would be simplistic to claim that the revival of *Botho* alone can eliminate poverty and crime, the principles of mutual respect, care and ethical leadership remain powerful tools for fostering social cohesion. In remembering and applying the teachings of Mohlomi, there is an opportunity to rethink what it means to lead, to serve and to live well in community with others.

Mohlomi is widely recognised as an exceptional and visionary leader whose philosophy of *Botho* and reconciliation laid the foundations for trust, ethical leadership and communal harmony. These principles inspire people to support their chiefs or leaders, and in turn, guide leaders to serve their communities with integrity. The Sesotho proverb *Morena ke morena ka batho* (A chief is a chief because of the people), encapsulates a leadership paradigm based on service, rather than domination.

Mohlomi instilled in chiefs, in Moshweshwe in particular, the idea that true leadership is rooted in humility and compassion, not authoritarian rule. If contemporary society were to adopt Mohlomi's philosophy of *Botho*, we would witness greater peace, tolerance and unity within our communities.

Sadly, *Botho* is fading in today's society. Poverty and crime are symptoms

of a loss of communal values and connectedness. Where *Botho* is lacking, inequality and social fragmentation take root. Yet, if people once again embraced the spirit of *Botho*, they would strive for mutual support and dignity. Those with abundance would not squander resources while others live in poverty.

Mohlomi and Moshweshwe both demonstrated that when leaders care for the vulnerable, poverty and crime diminish. Their legacy offers a timeless lesson: a nation rooted in compassion, solidarity and ethical leadership will thrive.

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