

AFRICAN CULTURAL SYSTEMS AND THE LANGUAGE IN AFRICAN TRANSITION: THE CASE OF URBAN YOUTH IN TSAKANE TOWNSHIP, SOUTH AFRICA.

BY

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Communities throughout the world are guided by mainstream cultural systems, for example, in South Africa there are different communities with their distinct languages ranging from English, Afrikaans, Sotho, Nguni languages and other languages.

The majority of the people in South Africa are Christians. However, there are people who are not affiliated to any religious denomination. My focus is on Tsakane in Gauten Province which has many Christians who speak different languages mentioned above. This place is situated in the East Rand about 30 km away from Johannesburg.

The Christian way of life is confined to the values, which are prescribed in the Bible, for a example when a child is born he or she is given a Christian name or a traditional name. They are expected to be church members, for example, the youth are required and expected to take part in church youth activities. The youth are also discouraged from pre-marital sex, gambling, alcoholism, and things which are considered deviant from Christian way of living.

In terms of communication, the youth are expected to use an acceptable language which is used by all age groups in the community. During the 1960s, things took another turn where the youth began to diverge from the mainstream culture. My focus is based on the research which was carried out recently, that is, from June 1994 to February 1996.

The research methodology employed is the Malinowskian participant observation. I took part in most of the events in order to get a first-hand information. I interviewed the youth and gathered data from secondary resources (Newspapers, magazines and texts).

Transition in my view refer to a process change. In this context a change of African cultural value system to a Western-oriented value system. There are different forces that have influenced the youth to deviate from African values to Western values, for example, Western movies, magazines, to mention but these two.

The medium of communication amongst the youth of both sexes in the area of the study is "Tsotsitaal, Ringers, Sprake or Sqamtho". All the four names mentioned are synonyms. There are various speculations about the origin of "Tsotsitaal". Some people believe that it originated in South African prisons while others say it originated at Shebeens and other social places, for example, at parties and sport fields.

Authors and researchers also have their perspectives about the origin of "Tsotsitaal". Language is one of the indispensable and universal features of the cultural systems of all societies. Language should be exploited as a resource for marking social boundaries, and the boundary-marking function of the language diversity works at the level of social group. The social groups use the idea of boundary marking to distinguish one group from the others (Herbert, 1992:1). That is exactly what is happening in Tsakane and else-where in the country amongst the youth. The youth create boundaries by utilising "Tsotsitaal" so that other age groups in the society can be left out. In that sense, they are, in a way deviant to the mainstream language.

In the area of study, the language is popularly known as "sqamtho" which is a synonym to other words used to refer to the language. The youth use their language to communicate in whatever socialisation process-the idea being to exclude the young ones and also the adults. The rural youths are also excluded from the language largely because they are considered to be backward in life, that is, in every sphere of life.

A researcher from the Sunday Times also mentioned the fact that "Tsotsitaal" is an unofficial language in South Africa and it is showing phenomenal growth among the youth. Words in the language change from area to area. In Cape Town for instance, it is more likely to be a combination of English and Xhosa while in Johannesburg, it is influenced by Afrikaans and Sotho. "Tsotsitaal" came to being as a way of protecting information from unwanted listeners. The dialect was used to encode

information during illegal transactions. It was also used at social gatherings.

In Johannesburg the youth language has different bases because of the mixture of various ethnic groups living together. It is insufficient or it is rather inaccurate for the Sunday Times researcher to say the youth language in Johannesburg has an Afrikaans and Sotho base.

Mathibe(1996:43) gives some of the words which are part of the language: smega, miering, (money), mezuzus, mataras (girls), spin, deal (to be involved), dizi, (bribery), cabin (shop), jubas (boyfriends).

According to Glaser(1994:54) "Tsotsitaal" was the most important element of "tsotsi" sub-cultural identity and also a secret language with the Afrikaans dialect. Around 1935 "Tsotsitaal" took over from the most popular language amongst the urban youth gangs, initially in Pretoria and later in the East Rand.

Having said that, it is apparent that there is a transition in terms of the language usage. The youth are now more exposed to "Tsotsitaal" than to the languages which are considered formal and official. According to the youth, both females and males, to talk a pure official language is boring a lot. They further mentioned that one has to be innovative and talk in whatever style will sound attractive. The formal language is for the adults and the youth from the rural areas. In the urban areas the official language is totally discouraged.

The majority of the youth in the area of study are unemployed and they resort to different methods of getting money to meet their needs. In case of guys, they become Golf caddies, car washers, dice gamblers, vendors and other means of generating income. Girls become card gamblers and also sell items.

The guys on Saturdays and Sunday go to Golf Clubs to be caddies. They are paid a *pink* (R50) after eighteen holes. Most of the guys carry twice a day and for two days it amounts to R200 which is reasonable to meet ones needs over the weekend, for example taking a girl-friend to the movie or to a night-club. Car-washers make about R400 or more because they start their work on Fridays and they charge a *tiger* (R10)

per car. Dice gambling has a lot of money although it is not a reliable method of generating income. It is not reliable because it depends on one's luck which also applies to card gambling by the girls.

There are various gambling methods mentioned by Pauw (1963:48-49). He also mentioned dice gambling as well as "Roya" and "Roqoroqo" as means of generating income among the youth. He also talks of the risk of gambling, that is, one's life can be put in danger. Actually, one has to go in a company of friends in order to be safe.

According to Mathibe 1996:43) gambling was the main source of income for students and thugs. The dice games normally ended with gamblers stabbing each other after the winner refused to give the consolation money. The stokfels are dominating the youth life especially in terms of finance. The majority of the youth in townships are members of the stokfels, the aim being to raise money. The youth are no longer largely depending on their parents for money instead they instead create ways and means of getting money which shows that there is a transition in terms of generating income. Stokfels is an association whose members on a fortnightly basis host each other. The others are expected to come with a certain fixed amount of money, for example R100 per member. They do that until each member is covered.

The youth both sexes in this area of study and elsewhere in the country generally tend to reject their given original names. The youth problems are that their parents gave them unattractive names, which are no longer relevant to the present situation.

Most parents spent so many hours selecting names for their new-born babies. Children at the later stage feel bored and change A baby is often given a name on an eventful day when it appears for the first time, for example, among the Sotho speaking people, say, on a rainy day, it could be called *pule* if it is a boy or *puleng* if is a girl (Becker, 1974:71).

Becker (1974:72) further mentioned that a name *Joalaboholo* is given to a new-born baby largely because on that day, "much beer" was being brewed.

In my view, the above name, which is associated with beer, is one of the

names, which the youth considered to be negative. They argued that, how can parents give such a name and according to so many youths, these names are depressing. It becomes difficult to introduce oneself with such a depressing name.

The youth of both sexes from the area of study have changed their original names. There was a guy who was given the name Lazarus. Lazarus as a name has a bad stigma in the area. It is associated with a person who is very poor. This guy has changed his name to *Lazaridus* which according to him is Australian in nature. Some of the guys have changed to *Jakes, Sqauvrol, Getup, General, Chicco, London, Chicago, Saxon, Woester* and so on. Girls have changed to *Be, Stanza, Staff, Stoksweet, Ntosh* and so on.

Wallwork(1967:87) share the same experience of changing names in his area of study. He mentioned that the youth at his area of study changed their names largely because those names were considered to be horrid and unsuitable.

Some of the names are considered to be rural and they are therefore decided to be changed. An example of such a name *Motswagae* which literally mean someone from home. The Sotho-speaking people refer to rural areas as "homes" and also applicable to rural youth. There is a stigma attached to rural life, rural life is considered to be backward and the youth from the urban areas do not want to be associated to rural life. Traditional names are therefore disliked by the youth because they reflect rural life.

The state of being academically and economically successful also influences individuals to change their names. The youth with formal education from tertiary institutions particularly females tend to change to fanciful names that they get from magazines and comics, for example, names such as *Stephane, Michelle, Paula*, and other names. Political involvement also drive individuals to change their names.

In case of political involvement, names are changed to confuse the police or rather disguise against the police so that the information on their organisation cannot be easily accessible (this also applies to criminal activities).

Bogopa (1994:11) has covered a case where a girl changed her name to a car's name. Whenever the police were in search of the girl, people who were asked about the name responded positively that they knew that name, that it was a car's name and the police were frustrated because they were looking for a person and for a car.

There is a particular sort of relationship attached to the change of names. The youth in most parts of the world feel that their names are no longer relevant instead they are depressing to them. It also shows that there is a transition in terms of names.

Shebeen life is a popular life amongst the youth at the area of study and in other townships. There is a lack of facilities in the area and the youth resort to going to the shebeen to socialise with other people while drinking liquor. Other deals are also made in the shebeen for example, dealing in selling drugs and so on. A shebeen also provides girlfriends and boyfriends; it is a home to those who feel lonely.

The term shebeen originates from the eighteenth century Irish Gaelic word "seben", which means "a beer of poor quality". Many people still have the feeling that shebeen is a dark, dingy and illegal drinking place where "tsotsis", gangsters and prostitutes hang out, pouring brandy and meths down their gullets and spitting on the floor. Today, many shebeens are upmarket taverns which command a large share of the liquor industry (Sunday Times Magazine, 8 October 1995).

The definition given by the Sunday Times Magazine is not accurate. Some of them are dark and dingy, while others are bright and convenient. Spitting on the floor is an exaggeration, it is not happening at both dingy and the bright shebeens. Instead shebeens in the townships are the most popular places where the youth go to on a regular basis to socialise with other.

At the shebeen the youth listen and dance to their favourite music. There are different styles of dancing, depending on time. Time here pertains to the seasons. A style may be en vogue for four or five years, after which another style emerges.

Couzens (1977:34) mentioned the dancing style called Marabi. Marabi

dance initially started at the Doorfontein and Prospect townships in the early 1930s. during its inception, it was a shebeen dance and Thebejane was the most famous exponent of it.

The issue of class is raised by De Hass (1994:102-104). She mentioned the fact that "class" was created by various factors, namely linguistic groupings, socio-economic status as well as political and academic status. The patrons who are wealthy and educated sit in the lounge or dining room in the shebeen and receive special treatment; this is a class which can afford vodcas and brandy. The rest of the patrons sit in the kitchen while others sit outside in the shack and they are referred to as the second and third classes. In my view, De Hass was to some extent misled by the shebeen owners in terms of explaining the issue of class. My experience with the shebeens is that patrons sit anywhere they like, one can be educated and wealthy and sit outside the house because of weather conditions. A poor patron can buy a vodca or a brandy and that does not qualify him or her to be in a certain class. Basically, the issue of class is a complex one and it is very difficult to explain it.

The youth are no longer interested in going to church on Sunday. Instead they go to the shebeens which shows that there is a transition in terms of life-style. Usually, on Saturdays, the youth prefer to go to the shebeens to wind up their time. Those who have boyfriends and girl-friends go there together. It is a tradition that on Sundays the youth go to the shebeens to drink liquor.

In conclusion, there is an immense transition in almost the whole sphere of life. The youth have changed their life but not negatively, as the media has in the past portrayed. Most of the things done by the youth are contributing positively to the economy of the country, for example the liquor industry is benefiting a lot from the youth. The advertising agencies have also capitalised on the youth generations and become successful in using "Tsotsitaal" to convey a powerful message to consumers. There is a beer called Ohlssons and its slogan is "The beer of the generation". Although there are youth behaviour which are negative and dangerous, for example dice gambling and drug trafficking, the money which has been utilised in negative activities circulate in the country and in a way contribute to the economic stand of the country.

To show that the language used by the youth is not harmful, the music as well as the film industries have also used and are still using the youth language to further their aims. In the past, the youth used to love and prefer overseas music but of late the youth are now more interested in the local music. There is a local musician who has recently released an album. Her name is Sharon D. and the popular number in her album is "local is Lekker" which means that the local music is the best. There is also a slogan which is "local is Lekker" which refers to the South African music in general being the best.

One of the musicians called Benda Fassie, was interviewed on the Radio Metro Station. She argued that, the reason for using "Tsotsitaal" to convey their message is because they just want to talk to the youth in the townships.

However, the film industry in the past has used the same language, for example, prior to the 1994 National Elections, a film called Khululekha was produced to educate the youth about the election procedures. There is a comedy called "Tender Hearts" in which youth language is used to entertain the youth.

The Government and the public need to understand the social dynamics in communities so that there can be a culture of tolerance amongst the people of different age groups. The gap between the age groups need to be bridged by coming up with strategies. The adults need to be educated about the youth language so that their negative attitudes towards the language can be removed.

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