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Abstract

Letsema (Setswana word which literally means voluntarily working together) is an important indigenous practice. It has been in existence since time immemorial among many Africans especially the Batswana speaking people of Southern Africa. Because many Africans were subsistence farmers in the past, they used letsema as a form of voluntary cooperative farming practice in the agricultural sector to increase production for their survival. Letsema was based on the philosophy of Ubuntu or Botho (which means caring, loving, sharing and supporting one another). That is, many Africans voluntarily assisted other community members and vice versa to plough, sow and harvest. This important indigenous practice continued from generation to generation. In this article we argue that letsema can be preserved as one of the important African indigenous knowledge practices. This preservation can best be done through incorporating it into the modern formal education system. We contend that at this period of education transformation and African Renaissance letsema can offer lessons to contemporary Africans, especially the youth, regarding the value of collectively building communities through voluntary contributions and service for development. It is our view that once the youths learn this voluntary service in their communities they would not only know its cultural value as Africans but also appreciate to practice and preserve it.

Key terms: letsema, indigenous knowledge, subsistence farming, education, ubuntu or botho.

INTRODUCTION

Letsema (voluntarily working together for a common goal) has been and still is one of the important practices of some of the indigenous people of Southern Africa. This practice has been conspicuous in all aspects of African life particularly in farming
(preparing the field, sowing and harvesting) and construction of houses, barns, pens and kraals. The tilling of the land and rearing of animals for livelihood have, for a long time, been a way of life among many Africans even before the dawn of colonialism (UNEP 2002).

Although not on a large scale, many Africans all over the continent have always cultivated the land to grow and harvest beans, cassava, maize, millets, sorghum, yam and many other types of foodstuffs for their livelihood and survival (Chenje and Johnson 1994; UNEP 2003). Most of them relied on voluntary human power from their communities members and relatives to undertake socio-economic projects such as farming, training of the youth or building of houses. Some community members could even lend cows to neighbours to help plough their fields. The voluntary spirit among Africans made people sacrifice their time to assist fellow community members to undertake various projects. In deed one does not have to be your family member or a relative to get help from you. There was a communal spirit, a cultural value that drove community members to assist each other. This voluntary co-operation was based on the belief that your neighbour’s problem or success is yours too. The current South African government, in some way, practices this African value in its housing projects. The government encourages savings on labour costs by encouraging family members, friends, neighbours and others to help construct the buildings themselves (www.services.gov.za/en-za/ruralsubsidy.htm [accessed on 19 June 2008]).

Under this type of communal spirit stealing from a neighbour or vandalising the property of other people was out of thought of many people as the crops and domestic animals of others were just as important as theirs. One would always be assured of food if one did not have. There was no need to steal because those who have would share with others who do not have. In view of this crops and livestock were protected and worked on by the community, in the community and for the community at all times.

In this article we argue that the indigenous practice of letsema can be an important strategy for formal education to inculcate and preserve in the youth the communal value and spirit of living and working together for development of the community in the 21st century. We argue that in this era of African Renaissance indigenous knowledge systems, practices and values such as those propagated by letsema cannot be left out of the school curriculum. Odora Hoopers (2002:2) succinctly points out that "the African Renaissance aims at building a deeper understanding of Africa, its languages and its methods of development. It is a project that includes the re-writing of major tenets of history, both past and contemporary. Indigenous knowledge systems thus posit tremendous challenges for the reconstruction and development strategies in the entire continent. The importance of Indigenous knowledge systems in education has also been highlighted by the Department of Education. Citing the National Curriculum Statement (Department of Education 2003), Grange (2004:205) writes:
Now people recognize the wide diversity of knowledge systems through which people make sense and attach meaning to the world in which they live. Indigenous knowledge systems in the South African context refer to a body of knowledge embedded in African philosophical thinking and social practices that have evolved over thousands of years. The National Curriculum statement Grades 10-12 (General) has infused indigenous knowledge systems into the Subject Statements.

Letsema as an indigenous knowledge can therefore play an important role in transforming education by inculcating in the youth an important value of brotherhood through voluntary assistance to community members in the 21st century.

THE PRACTICE OF LETSEMA

In practice Letsema depicts a situation where people of the same community voluntarily offer their services and work together to achieve individual and community development (www.services.gov.za/en-za/Peopleshousing.htm[accessed on 19 June 2008]). Under letsema community members would, for example, voluntarily come together to assist a member of the community to sow, harvest, build a house, a barn or a kraal. They would render similar assistance to other members until all the people who need help have been assisted. It is important to note that the practice of letsema enabled community members unite to increase food production at no financial cost. This has been the practice of many indigenous African communities, especially Botswana Southern Africa. The spirit d’ corps in letsema can be used as a modern tool for community development in the 21st century. Communities should not fold their arms and wait on the government to provide all their development needs. Local communities should be able to start community farms (and sell food stuffs at a very cheap price to the community members), build schools, clinics, play grounds or even streets. Such initiatives would not only attract government attention for assistance but also bring development to local communities at lesser costs.

Letsema may have similar practices in other parts of the world. In the Eastern Group some aspects of Marxism can be equated to letsema. Cathrine MacKinnon assesses Marxist theory (Aronowitz and Giroux 1985) and maintains that productive work is central in this theory and this is equally true with letsema. However while Marxism is a political ideology letsema is based on African value of brotherhood. It is not based on any political theory or enforced by state organs. Cathrine MacKinnon adds that “an activity by which people become what they are, class is its structure, production its consequence, capital its concealed form and control its issue” (Aronowitz and Giroux 1985). Although the two may have some commonalities letsema is unstructured and undocumented. It is not politically enforced or based on class as it might be in the case of Marxism. As an African way of life people provide services voluntarily and this practice is passed on from
generation to generation. Thus *Letsema* is not what Lenin envisaged during the Bolshevick Revolution as turning the society into "one office and one factory" and "erecting a great united organized mechanized system of social production" (Prychtko 1991). It is neither equated to socialism as understood by Mises (Prychtko 1991: 40).

*Letsema* was practiced for a number of reasons, among others, being in line with the notion cited by Mises that "no single man can ever master all possibilities in production, innumerable as they are, as to be in a position to make straightforward evident judgments of value without the aid of some system of computation" ((Prychtko 1991). That is, *letsema* was a communal voluntary effort which aimed at achieving a particular objective (Lodge 1987: www.services.gov.za/lenza/Peopleshousing.htm [accessed on 19 June 2008]). In indigenous African communities *letsema* was practiced with the aim of encouraging and motivating the workers who are sharing a particular task to make it feel less challenging and complicated. In a Batswana village for example, the entire people would start the process by ploughing the chief's fields. That is called *ilimna* in *Isizulu* (Ramagoshi 2004). From the chief the voluntary assistance would spread to all community members in need of human power.

The dominant human activity in indigenous African communities has always been farming- crop production and animal rearing. Domesticated animals such as cattle, goats, pigs, sheep and fowls are kept in addition to growing of foodstuffs (Chenje and Johnson 1994). Both the cultivation of land and rearing of animals needed human power and in the ancient times this was readily provided by relatives, neighbours and other community members. *Letsema* was very important in African communities because it enabled individuals to increase production and thus avoided starvation of community members.

The practice of *Letsema* is based on the philosophy of humanity (Ubuntu or Botho (literally; caring, loving, sharing and supporting one another) (Ramagoshi 2004). Among some indigenous African communities, people who did not have animals such as cattle, sheep or goats would voluntarily look after their neighbours' livestock. As a token of appreciation one female cow would be marked for the voluntary herd boy. That is called *go tshwaya* (Setswana, literally to mark). Once it bears calves they were given to the herd boy to start his own animal farming project. Thus *Letsema* enabled African community members who never had any livestock to acquire some by looking after the livestock of others. This practice helped to create employment among community members.

The purpose of farming in the African indigenous societies was not for profit making but for survival (Ramagoshi 2004). However, the influence of western life and the realities of modern socio-economic conditions make indigenous farmers to sell some of their produce to enable them meet some of their other needs. During harvest the volunteers would be given some foodstuff (e.g. millet, maize, sorghum or potatoes,) to take home. This served as a token of appreciation for their support, time and
sacrifice. The preservation of letsema could lead to poverty alleviation and ensure food security in the rural communities.

In modern times Letsema may be practiced on a larger scale through intergovernmental projects. The Community-Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) project undertaken by Mozambique, Zambia and Zimbabwe is a case in point. The wildlife of Southern Africa makes this project one of the best tourist attractions in the world. There is a lot of wildlife in the 'Tri-Nations Corner', that is where Mozambique, Zambia and Zimbabwe meet and by coming together the three neighbouring countries could pull resources together, attract international tourists and improve their economies (UNEP, 2002). The Tchuma Tchato (Our wealth) Initiative, a CBNRM project is another example of letsema between villagers of 'Tri-Nations Corner' where the borders of Mozambique, Zambia and Zimbabwe meet (UNEP, 2002; www.services.gov.za/ en-za/Peopleshousing.htm, [accessed on 19 June 2008]).

THE IMPLICATIONS OF LETSEMA FOR EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Letsema teaches that in any true African community every child born there belongs to the community and every adult in that community is a parent to all children they come into contact with (Mecoemere, 2007). However, this does not dispute the foster child parent relationship in the context where a child loses parents. (www.services.gov.za/ en-za/familysupportservices1.htm, [accessed on 19 June 2008]). This is confirmed by the saying; 'it takes the whole village to bring up a child'.

In this era of education transformation, the South African government has recognized the role of local communities in the education of children hence schools have been given to them to govern (South African Schools Act 84 of 1996). Both national and provincial departments of education recognize the role of communities in bringing up children hence they maintain that the early stages of the development of any child needs the combined effort of the community, parents and the government (Mecoemere, 2007). This recognition of parents and or community role in education confirms the importance of letsema as an indigenous knowledge and practice that can be applied to enhance education and training of the youth to become true Africans.

The realities of the socio-economic conditions in the contemporary African society make it imperative for both the home and the school to come together to educate the modern child. The success of letsema is premised on the notion that my neighbour’s child is my child. Thus parents in every community would voluntarily assist and encourage every child to attend school or take their studies seriously. As already mentioned in this discussion in true African society no one person can bring up a child. The up bringing of children is the responsibility of the whole community. The practice of letsema would make adults in our communities (including educators
and parents) to see themselves as parents of all children. Thus the school and the community could form strong partnerships to provide relevant support, education and training for the African youth.

When communities come together to educate and train African youth, inappropriate behaviours can be identified and corrected early before they become entrenched among them. The violent behaviour among some of the youth which results in loss of lives like the killing of fellow learners and even educators (Sowetan, March 28, 2007) could be stopped when the community, especially parents, and the schools work together. *Letsema* may be applied in various ways of life. Since it teaches people to support community members voluntarily it implies that the education of the modern child should not be the responsibility of any one individual. All adults in a particular community must collectively come together to educate that child. That includes providing voluntary care resources, time and service to local community schools by adults to enhance teaching and learning. Local communities should form partnerships with schools in order to get the best education for the youth (Quan-Baffour, 2005: 121).

*Letsema* can also be used as a tool to provide good education for the youth and thereby reduce illiteracy in local communities. The slogan which was once used by the youths of Congress of South Africa Students (COSAS), namely, 'each one teach one', could come into play to further promote *letsema*. That is, each literate youth could teach another illiterate youth. Each literate adult can adopt and teach one illiterate adult in their community by providing them with literacy or numeracy skills. In this way more adult members of African communities may thus become literate and be able to lead useful lives and play more meaningful roles in their respective communities. In this way, *letsema* could be used to inculcate and preserve African Indigenous Knowledge in the youth through formal education in the 21st century.

*Letsema*, as an indigenous African knowledge, should be included in the school curriculum, in order to inculcate in the youth the culture of co-operation, love and respect for authority and authority figures such as adults. This would make them learn that every adult in the community is their parent. The youth would also learn that each and every individual in their community has got rights like them and that rights go with responsibilities. When children learn these at school they could be law-abiding and thus violent crimes against their fellow human beings might reduce. The youth could also learn the spirit of co-operation and service to their communities without financial gain. With *letsema* as part of formal education and training, many youths who are able to start their own businesses could readily employ, support and or teach others the knowledge, skills and values to set up their own. This spirit of brother- and or sisterhood could reduce unemployment and its concomitant robbery and violence attacks on fellow community members.
CONCLUSION

In this paper we have described and outlined the values of letsema as an indigenous knowledge which is worth preserving. We further argued that as Africa and its nations 'rejuvenate' the practice of letsema must be taught and learnt as part of African heritage. It can be concluded from the discussion that letsema can be best preserved, practiced and inculcated in the youth through its inclusion in the school curriculum. When included in the school curriculum it can remain an integral part of African philosophy, way of life, an important tool for development and African Renaissance.

REFERENCES


