

AN ANALYSIS OF TWO SETSWANA COLOUR TERMS: *NTSHO* AND *TSHWEU*

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Abstract

This paper explores the linguistic contexts, uses and meanings of the colour terms *ntsho* (black) and *tshweu* (white) in Setswana. Using a corpus data, the paper argues that the two terms display cultural and linguistic meanings which are sometimes lacking in Setswana dictionaries and certain translations. The analysis of the data reveals that the two colour terms collocate with a variety of other words in the language to result in a complex array of meanings. Further, the analysis reveals that while traditionally *ntsho* is associated with negative semantics, it is used in a variety of senses to celebrate heroes and heroines in Setswana culture. In a similar way, *tshweu* has negative senses in certain limited contexts.

Keywords: *ntsho*, *tshweu*, colour terms, Setswana

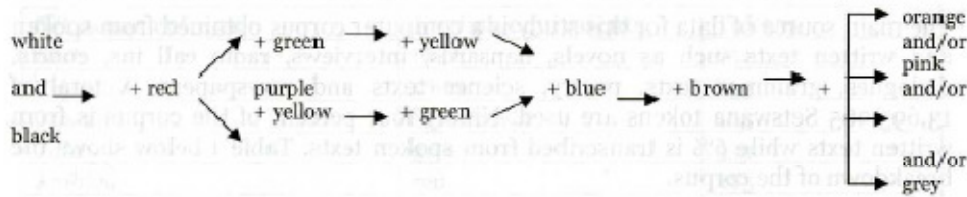
Introduction and Objective

Colour is an important feature of the visual environment and a source of vital information. In the modern technological world, artefacts, information and objects are frequently distinguishable only by colour as in traffic lights, electric wires, pens, and water taps. Objects such as clothing, cars, and houses are often separated easily by their colour, thus making colour an important feature for distinguishing objects and a common feature in conversation. Linguists, philosophers and anthropologists have an interest in how people in different speech communities perceive colour and how colour is lexicalised. The interest in colour lies in the fact that the colour spectrum is seen as a continuous gradation of colours with no natural divisions. Nevertheless, every language arbitrarily divides the spectrum by its colour terms in various unique ways.

Kay and McDaniel's (1978:612) argument that colour reflects a continuous physical dimension is based on the way people casually talk about it. In English, people often talk about something *being a good red, an off red, a sort of red, slightly red or a yellowish red*. These expressions are an indication of the degrees to which the colour referred to approximates an ideal example of a colour term. Kay and McDaniel's argument that colour categories are continuous and a matter of degree, and that their categories should be best regarded as fuzzy sets, is probably an accurate characterisation of colour.

The paper explores the linguistic contexts, uses and meanings of the colour terms *ntsho* (black) and *tshweu* (white) in Setswana. The paper argues that the two terms display more cultural and linguistic meanings than those given in Setswana dictionaries and certain translations. The scope of the research has been narrowed

Figure 1: Berlin and Kay's Evolutionary Sequence for the Development of Colour Terms



Berlin and Kay's study also concluded that though there was considerable variation across languages in the boundaries of colour space that terms referred to, there was marked agreement over the best examples of colour terms. The major criticism of the Berlin and Kay's study has been its concept of basicness (see Crawford 1982) and the small sample of speakers used (Davis et al 1992).

Setswana Colour Studies

There is a paucity of research on Setswana colour terms. The only study on Setswana colour terms that the researchers came across is that of Davis et al (1992) which investigates the basic terms of Setswana and tests Berlin and Kay's (1969) theory of colour universals. The study concluded that Setswana colour patterns conform to Berlin and Kay's model and that the language has six basic colour terms which they distinguished as *tshweu* (white), *ntsho* (black), *khibidu* (red), *tala* (blue and green), *thokwa* (brown) and *lephutshe* (yellow). The lack of interest by researchers in Setswana colour terms deprives linguists of the cultural and linguistic wealth embodied in the colour terms and their users' conceptualization of the world.

The use of complex colours is not a recent cultural development amongst the Batswana. Since time immemorial Batswana have used Setswana colour terms to determine how ripe their crops are, what season it is, and when the rains would come. Colour also plays a significant role in the making and painting of clay pots, beads, baskets, and decorations of huts and homestead to which a wide variety of colours and patterns are applied. Setswana also possesses a complex colour system for domesticated animals especially cattle. Before the introduction of the branding iron, farmers identified their livestock by a detailed colour description. The description of livestock detailed the colour, its shade, its combination with other colours and the patterns of combination. The result has been an elaborate Setswana cattle colour system.

Despite the traditional uses of Setswana colour terms discussed above, the speakers have not increased their basic colour terms and complexity of their colour patterns; instead, the language lies in danger of losing its animal colour term system as the Tswana communities turn from rural agricultural communities to more urbanised and technological centres. Consequently, cattle colour terms remain familiar to a small population of the older generation and herd boys and unfamiliar to a younger generation and urban dwellers.

The Data and Methodology

The main source of data for this study is a computer corpus obtained from spoken and written texts such as novels, hantsards, interviews, radio call ins, courts, dialogues, grammar texts, poetry, science texts and newspapers. A total of 13,695,965 Setswana tokens are used. Ninety four percent of the corpus is from written texts while 6% is transcribed from spoken texts. Table 1 below shows the breakdown of the corpus.

Table 1: Corpus Statistics

Text type	Tokens
Written language	12,831,759
Spoken language	840,400

The corpus approach used in this study has been characterised by Biber et al. (1998: 4) as having four essential characteristics. First, it is empirical; it analyzes the actual language patterns used in natural texts. Second, it utilizes a large and principled collection of natural texts known as a "corpus" as the basis of analysis. Third, it makes extensive use of computers for analysis, using both automatic and interactive techniques. Finally, it depends on both quantitative and qualitative analytical techniques.

The Software

The statistical analysis is conducted by the use of a corpus querying software (CQS); WordSmith Tools (Scott, 2004-2006) which is an integrated suite of three main programs: *Wordlist*, *Concord* and *Keywords*. The wordlist tool is used to produce wordlists or word-cluster lists from a text and render the results alphabetically or by frequency order. It is also used to calculate how words are spread across a variety of texts. The concordancer, *Concord*, provides a word or phrase in context – so that one can study its co-text, that is, the kind of words that occur in its vicinity. The *KeyWords* tool calculates words which are key in a text, that is, used more frequently or less frequently in a given corpus.

A calculation of the frequency of seven Setswana colour terms: *ntsho* (black), *tshweu* (white), *tshetlha* (light brown or cream white), *tala* (grue), *khibidu* (red), *thokwa* (brown), and *serolwana* (yellow) shows that *ntsho* (black) and *tshweu* (white) have the largest number of tokens with 652 and 635 tokens respectively as illustrated in Table 2.

These results indicate that the two colour terms have been used with greater frequency than other colour terms in the corpus. The greater frequency of the two terms is taken to suggest greater semantic wealth found in the two terms. The rest of the paper thus restricts itself to the analysis of the meanings of these two terms.

Table 2: The Frequency of Seven Setswana Colour Terms

Setswana colours	English equivalents	Tokens
<i>Ntsho</i>	black	652
<i>Tshweu</i>	white	635
<i>Tshetlha</i>	light brown	465
<i>Tala</i>	grue	339
<i>Khibidu</i>	red	285
<i>Thokwa</i>	brown	56
<i>Serolwana</i>	yellow	27

An Analysis of *ntsho* (black)

Current data reflects several senses or meanings of the word *ntsho* (black). The basic meaning of *ntsho* is to express the colour of pure blackness as a quality of entities. Kgasa and Tsonope (1998:199) define *ntsho* in this way:

ntsho *TT td. mmala o o tshwanang le lefifi kana mosidi*
(a colour similar to darkness or soot).

By identifying black as a colour of darkness or of soot, Kgasa and Tsonope appeal to culturally salient entities that represent what it is to be black. This meaning of blackness is also captured in expressions such as:

1. *tukwi e ntsho* (a black scarf)
2. *koloi e ntsho* (a black car)
3. *pitse e ntsho* (a black horse)

Ntsho is also used in Setswana phrases as a kind of intensifier to express a greater degree of blackness. This phenomenon is illustrated in the following examples: *lefifi le le ntsho* (black darkness) or *bosigo jo bo ntsho* (black night). In these phrases *ntsho* is used as an intensifier since night and darkness are already black or dark. Qualifying night and darkness as black expresses a greater intensity of darkness. *Lefifi le le ntsho* means 'pitch darkness' while *bosigo jo bo ntsho* refers to 'a pitch black night'.

Whenever Batswana describe a black person as 'black', they are not making a distinction between a black and white person, rather 'black' is used as an intensifier to express a very dark complexion on a black person. For example, *O tshotse ngwana yo montsho* (she gave birth to a black child) suggests that the child is very dark in complexion. In a similar way, black people of a light complexion are sometimes described as being *basweu* (white or light).

In many contexts the words *ntsho* (black) and *lefifi* (dark) are used interchangeably. However, *lefifi* is often not used to describe human complexion. Thus in Setswana to say **Mosimane yo o lefifi* (This boy is dark) is anomalous while *Ntlo e e lefifi* (This house is dark) is acceptable.

Ntsho is also used in a variety of idiomatic expressions to express a range of meanings. The idiomatic expression *bana ba thari e ntsho* (children of the black skin cradle), for instance, is used to celebrate and refer to Africa's black people. This expression occurs in the following concordance lines from the corpus:

4. madi a fetotswe ke eng **bana ba thari e ntsho**? Seo se ne sa gwetlha bangongoregi
5. le se se okang basweu le **bana ba thari e ntsho**. Sepetlele le sona se bidiwa "Dis
6. inyadisitse ka seteropo. **Bana ha thari e ntsho**, Lefatshe le fetogile le athame,
7. ana a re se tswane Re le **bana ba thari e ntsho**! Moditšhaba o re boloketse setšh
8. Lona robalang ka kagiso **bana ba thari e ntsho** Lo e lole ga e kitla e hubela lel

The noun *setimela* or *tshutshumakgala* (train) is sometimes rendered in a structure with *ntsho* as illustrated in the following bolded phrases in the concordance lines:

9. la borogo le setimela. E befile **tshipi e ntsho** ya makgowa e gatoga go tobetsega.
10. a ga Mmamoiwa. Tshitshumakgale, **pitse e ntsho** ya Makgoa e ne e ntse e sutsa m
11. tse. SETIMELA Tshutshumakgala ke **pitse e ntsho**, Pitse ya mafatshe a gosele, Pits
12. fa pele ga sebokolodi sa tsela, **tshipi e ntsho** ya ga Poulwe se thukuthetse, o ne
13. SETIMELA tshutshumakgala **kgomo e ntsho ya ga puso ya Poulo** Puso ya Poulo

The bolded structures show that a train can be described in many ways in Setswana, amongst these being [9 and 12] a black iron, [10 and 11] a black horse, and [13] a black cow. Because of its speed the train is referred to as 'a black horse' and because of its metal structure it is referred to as 'a black iron'. It is probably referred to as 'a black cow' because the early coal powered trains were black and traditionally cows, or more accurately heifers, were used as beasts of burden or modes of transport.

The phrase *kobo e ntsho* (a black blanket) expresses a similar meaning as the English expression *a dark cloud*. Its meaning is negative. The corpus reveals that words which follow *kobo e ntsho* are negative also as illustrated in the following concordance lines:

14. a go nna morutabana e le go apola kobo e ntsho **ya go tlhoka kitso** mo Bantshong.
15. tsa motsofadi; Bo apesa botlhe ka kobo e ntsho **ya moriti wa loso**. Fa motho a se

16. api, O apesitse lefatshe ka kobo, Kobo e ntsho **ya lefifi legolo**. Ya meepong-Jw
17. tswa kgakala la apesa lefatshe ka kobo e ntsho **e kete le bega loso lo lontsho**
18. na leratia ka le ne le wetswe ke kobo e ntsho **ya bodutu**. Fa re baya rre Selepe
19. ba leba a be a bona ba apesiwa ke kobo e ntsho **ya bosigo**. Ga ne ga feta motsotso
20. ore ga re kgakala le go aparwa ke kobo e ntsho **ya bohutsana**. A re emeng ka dinao
21. we ya ditoropo tse di apesitweng kobo e ntsho **ke bolwetse** jwa segajaja. Dipatli

The above negative phrases translate into English to mean the following (Table 3):

Table 3: Negative Kobo e Ntsho Collocates

<i>kobo e ntsho ya go tlhoka kitso</i>	a black blanket of ignorance
<i>kobo e ntsho ya moriti wa loso</i>	a black blanket of the shadow of death
<i>kobo e ntsho ya lefifi legolo</i>	a black blanket of great darkness
<i>kobo e ntsho e kete le bega loso lo lontsho</i>	a black blanket as if one reports a terrible death
<i>kobo e ntsho ya bodutu</i>	a black blanket of loneliness
<i>kobo e ntsho ya bosigo</i>	a black darkness of darkness
<i>kobo e ntsho ya bohutsana</i>	a black darkness of sadness
<i>kobo e ntsho ya bolwetse</i>	a black darkness of disease

These meanings suggest that *ntsho* is used to characterise such abstract nouns as *bodutu* (loneliness), *bohutsana* (sadness), *go tlhoka kitso* (ignorance) and *losa* (death).

However, the negativity is not only restricted to *kobo e ntsho*. Other words that collocate with *e ntsho* display similar negative meanings as reflected in the following concordance lines:

22. imo ngwanaka. Pelo ya me e **rotha kgodu e ntsho ya kutlobotlhoko**; Pelo ya me e ne
23. latela ka ntsha ya **botlhodi jwa katse e ntsho** jo bo dirilweng ke Pheko. Mosadim
24. lapa. Ba re **pelo ya gago e ntsho tota**, E ntsho bontsho jwa pitsa e
25. pa. A itse gore ga a **buele mo tlogong e ntsho**; fa a re o tla ba tsenya mo dipha
26. a fa ba mmona a le mo lebopong la **noka e ntsho ya loso** ka gonne ba mo tlogetse k

The bolded expressions from 22-26 translate into 22. 'dripping a thick black liquid of melancholy,' 23. 'a bad omen of a black cat,' 24. 'your heart is truly black,' 25. 'speaking into a dark head,' and 26. 'a black river of death' respectively.

The term *ntsho* is also used to mean both black and dark. The next set of phrases illustrates the meaning '*ntsho*' which refers to entities which are dark but not necessarily 'black'.

- 27. *leru le le ntsho* (a dark cloud)
- 28. *tee e ntsho* (black tea, tea without milk)
- 29. *tshipi e ntsho* (dark metal)

Although *ntsho* often has negative connotations, it sometimes carries positive ones in poetic expressions where heroes or heroines are described as *ntsho* to suggest bravado, fearless, daring, or courageous qualities as illustrated in these concordance lines:

- 30. nne ya ga Moilantwa Ke ene **kgosi kwena e ntsho ya madiba** Kolobe ya ga Mheta a
- 31. wena e e reng e bohwa gotwe: Ke **kwena e ntsho ya Modiana-a-Tau** Fifi la Mokwena,
- 32. atleng Motse wa **Salema wa babina-kwena e ntsho ya ga Ramoriana** o ne o itidimalet
- 33. motseng wa Moduane moo go busang **Kwena e ntsho ya Modiane a tau.** Motse o, jaaka
- 34. otlo e nne ya ga . Ke ena kgosi, **kwena e ntsho ya madiba.** Kolobe ya ga Mheta a m
- 35. la kwa Enyelane, Morena Seretse **Tlhapi e ntsho** e e fa gare ga mawatle E ntsho e
- 36. re tlere Fa a ipoka a re ena ke **poo e ntsho** ya Sepilonko, maila go fenugwa. M

In 30 and 34, a chief is celebrated as 'a black crocodile of the ponds' and in 31 and 33, a poet praises an individual as 'a black crocodile of Modiana of Tau'. 35 praises Seretse as 'a black fish that lies in between oceans'. In 36, an individual is reported as praising himself as 'a black bull'. The heroism and bravado in these expressions is enhanced by the use of *ntsho* with *poo* (bull) and *kwena* (crocodile) which are big and strong animals. In 35 President Seretse Khama is referred to as a black fish in reference to a black person with an overseas education.

An Analysis of Tshweu (White)

Current data reflects several senses or meanings of the word *tshweu*, *bosweu*, or *sweu* (white). The basic meaning of *tshweu* is to express the colour of pure whiteness. Kgasa and Tsonope (1998:316) define it in this way:

tshweu TG *td. mmala was maši kana letswai; mmala o o dirwang ke mebala yotlhe e tlhakane.* (the colour of milk or salt; the colour made by a combination of all colours).

As in the definition of *ntsho* above, Kgasa and Tsonope here also appeal to culturally salient entities of salt and milk to express the meaning of *tshweu*. Appealing to culturally salient entities is a more effective way of representing meaning unlike the second part of the definition which defines white as 'the colour made by a combination of all colours'. While the second part of the definition might be scientifically accurate, it is not simple and clear to non scientific readers. The meaning of white colour is illustrated by the following examples found in the data:

37. *meno a masweu* (white teeth)
38. *Podi e tshweu* (a white goat)
39. *Sakatukwi e tshweu* (a white handkerchief)

Tshweu is also used to express a state full of light or sufficient light as illustrated by these expressions:

40. *Kgweđi e tlhatswitse go le go sweu* (the moon shone and it was white).
41. *Fa a bula lebati, ga nna go sweu* (when he/she opened the door it became white).
42. *Naledi e tshweu* (a white star).

The colour *tshweu* also pertains to the race of white people as illustrated in the following expressions:

43. *Dipolasi tsa basweu* (white people's farms)
44. *Puso ya basweu* (white people's government)
45. *Modimo wa basweu* (a white people's God)
46. *Dithoto tsa basweu* (white people's goods)

Tshweu is also used to describe black people who are light in complexion as illustrated in the following examples:

47. *O nyetse mosetsana yo mosweu* (He is married to a light girl).
48. *Bana ba gagwe ba basweu fela botlhe* (All his children have a light complexion).

Tshweu is sometimes used to refer to a colour that is light or bright but not necessarily white such as in:

49. *Moriri o mosweu* (grey hair)
50. *Metsi a masweu* (colourless/clean water)
51. *Tee e tshweu* (white tea or tea with milk)

Being the opposite of *ntsho*, *tshweu* is often associated with goodness, purity, cleanliness, perfection etc as illustrated by:

52. *Baengele ba basweu* (white angels)
53. *Diatla tse di tshweu* (clean hands)
54. *Pelo e tshweu* (kind heart or full of contentment)
55. *Tsela tshweu* (safe journey)

The word *tshweu* collocates with a variety of words to express a range of positive meanings in the language (cf. example 56-58). When *tshweu* collocates with *tsela* (road) in the structure *Tsela-tshweu* (white road) a message of good wishes 'safe journey' or 'travel well' is expressed. *Tshweu* in this structure is used to express a state in which there is an absence of danger in the trip. Additionally, when *tshweu* collocates with *pelo* to form *pelo-tshweu* a meaning of satisfaction and deep contentment is created. This information is reflected in the following concordance lines:

The expression, *pula e tshweu* (white rain) is used to express well wishes and satisfaction.

56. a ngwana jaaka gale. Smith a nesa **pula e tshweu** fa Jona a tla go bega gore
57. rentse a bo a mo eleletsa **tsela tshweu** mo mosepeleng wa gagwe e tswa re
58. Kare o tshwana le rrago o **pelo tshweu!** Mokwena. Monnamogolo a mo tlhoma

When *tshweu* collocates with *tlhogo* (head) or *moriri/thiri* (hair) it expresses old age. For example *letlhogo-tshweu* or plural *matlhogo -tshweu* (one with a white head/hair) refers to an old man or woman. It is interesting to note that though *letlhogo-tshweu* or *matlhogo tshweu* refer to people they cannot be used with personal prefixes *mo-* and *ba-*. *Thiri e tshweu* (a white strand of hair) is also used to express old age.

It is interesting to note that in Setswana *tshweu* does not always have positive characteristics nor is it always associated with goodness as illustrated by:

59. *sepoko se se sweu* (a white ghost)
60. *naga e tshweu* (an empty space or nothingness)
61. *mpa tshweu* ('white stomach' characterises extreme poverty or one who is a destitute)

The reduplication of *tshweu* (white) as in *tshweu-tshweu* (white-white) is used to refer to a greater intensity of whiteness. For instance,

62. *O apere hempe e tshweu-tshweu* (She is wearing a very white shirt).
63. *Pampiri ya gagwe e ne e se tshweu-tshweu* (His paper was not bright white).

Other idiomatic expressions that use *sweu/tshweu* portray a range of meanings discussed below (cf. example 64-68). For instance, the idiomatic expression: *go e supa sweu* means to refuse definitively as illustrated in the following concordance lines:

64. t!wa ga bana. Moruti wa Lontone a e supa sweu. A bolelela mogokgo a sa okaoke.
65. Erete mme a nna marama a a thata. A supa sweu, a gana go tswa ka nnete.
Gape ga
66. i, le mo dibekeng tse di latelang a supa sweu; mme, ka pelo e le selo fela, ya m
67. la jaaka monwana o le botlhoko c) a supa sweu d) ya mo ela motlhaje le mosimane
68. ela mosadi se ba t!leng ka sona, a supa sweu, a bo a se thetsa gore motho yo o

The idiomatic expression *meno masweu a bolaya a tshaga* (literally, white teeth kill laughing) occurs in a variety of forms. In certain contexts it is *meno masweu polaya-e-tshaga* while in others it is *meno masweu mabolaya a tshaga*. The idiomatic expression means that a smile may be masking an evil intent. It therefore warns one not to be deceived by the human façade.

Other miscellaneous uses of *tshweu* include *pampiri e tshweu* (white paper) and *nonyane e tshweu mmamoleane* (a white egret). *Pampiri e tshweu* appears to be a transliteration of the English word 'white paper' – an official government paper. In many Setswana poems and traditional Setswana songs, *mmamoleane* is referred descriptively as *nonyane e tshweu mmamoleane*. The descriptive reference celebrates or praises the beauty of the bird.

Conclusion

The analysis of *ntsho* and *tshweu* illustrates the way the two colour terms have expanded and forged new connections in the language to represent Batswana sentiments, associations, emotional history and common traditions and beliefs. While *tshweu* is generally believed to carry positive connotations this paper has discovered that in some limited contexts it can also carry negative ones. *Ntsho* has also been found to celebrate positive qualities, suggesting that these two words are not antonymic in all contexts.

The paper has also shown that in some contexts *ntsho* and *tshweu* are used metaphorically as in *pelo e tshweu* (*white heart or contentment*) or *leso le lentsho* (*black death*). Carter et al (2002:84) contend that metaphors can be used to create connections between areas of meanings that may have no direct link but offer a useful comparison or connection that helps to enhance, reinforce, clarify and make vivid existing ideas or concepts. The use of *ntsho* and *tshweu* in idioms and metaphors has therefore expanded the meanings of these terms beyond their current dictionary meanings.

Having analysed *ntsho* and *tshweu* with the support of Setswana corpus data, the paper recommends a revision of the dictionary entries of *ntsho* and

tshweu in Kgasa and Tsonope's dictionary. The *ntsho* entry in Kgasa and Tsonope (1998:199) is rendered as follows:

ntsho TT *td.* *mmala o o tshwanang le lefifi kana mosidi* (a colour similar to darkness or soot).

The paper recommends that the definition be reviewed to capture a variety of meanings both as main meanings and as dictionary subentries in the following manner:

ntsho *td.* **1.** black, a colour of pure darkness or soot **2.** a colour of people of African descent **3.** a) expresses a greater degree of darkness in people of African descent or darkness **4.** expresses dark and gray colours which are not necessarily b) expresses a greater degree of darkness in dark areas **5.** a word that celebrates black heroes and heroines. **■' bana ba thari e ntsho:** black African people **■ tshipi e ntsho:** a train **■ pitse e ntsho:** a train **■ kobo e ntsho:** a black cloud that hangs over something **■ rotha kgodu e ntsho:** be in deep grief **■ tlhogo e ntsho:** stupidity.

Similarly, Kgasa and Tsonope's (1998:316) definition of *tshweu* which is rendered as:

tshweu TG *td.* *mmala was maši kana letswai; mmala o o dirwang ke mebala yotlhe e thakane.* (the colour of milk or salt; the colour made by a combination of all colours).

This definition requires revision in the following manner to achieve a more comprehensive entry that covers a broad variety of meanings.

tshweu *td.* **1.** the colour of milk or salt **2.** a state full of light or sufficient light **3.** a colour of people of European descent **4.** used to describe black people who are light in complexion **5.** used to refer to a colour that is light or bright but not necessarily white **6.** a colour of goodness, purity, cleanliness or perfection **■ letlhogo tshweu:** an old person **■ thiri e tshweu:** grey hair **■ tsela tshweu:** go well! **■ pelo tshweu:** satisfied; delighted **■ pampiri e tshweu:** a government white paper **■ go e supa sweu:** refuse definitively **■ meno masweu polaya e tshega:** smiles can be deceptive **■ nonyane e tshweu mmamoleane:** a white egret.

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