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The Pew Research Project on African Proverbs

Embracing the Baobab Tree

The African Proverb in the 21st Century

EDITOR, WILLEM SAAYMAN

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LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

Alagoa, Prof E J. Dept of History, Univ of Port Harcourt, Nigeria.

Amoah, Dr Elizabeth. Dept of Study of Religion, Univ of Ghana, Ghana.

Bennett, Rev Pat. Theological College of Central Africa, Ndola, Zambia.

Chindongo, Ms Marion. World Vision Malawi, Blantyre, Malawi.

Cotter, Fr George. Roman Catholic Church, Debre Zeit, Ethiopia.

Dalfovo, Dr Albert. Dept of Philosophy, Makere Univ, Uganda.

Damiba, Dr Francois-Xavier. Koumi Major Seminary, Bobo-Dioulasso, Burkina Faso.

Kimmerle, Prof Heinz. Faculty of Philosophy, Erasmus Univ, Rotterdam, The Netherlands.

Knappert, Prof Jan. ex-SOAS, Barnet, Herts, UK.

Kudadjie, Rev Joshua. Dept Study of Religion, Univ of Ghana, Ghana.

Lupande, Mr Joseph. African Clinic Project, Mwanza, Tanzania.

Matta, Ms Hilda. Dept of German, Cairo Univ, Egypt.

Mbaye, Mrs Fatou. Central State Univ, Wilberforce, Ohio, USA.

Mbiti, Prof John. Dept of Mission, Univ of Bern, Switzerland.

Mbolokala, Prof. Univ of Kinshasa, Zaire.

Mieder, Prof Wolfgang. Dept of German & Russian, Univ of Vermont, USA.

Mkuchu, Ms Jesca. Christian Council of Tanzania, Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania.

Mokitimi, Dr Makali. Dept of Afr. Languages, Univ of Lesotho, Lesotho.

Mphande, Rev D K. Univ of Malawi, Blantyre, Malawi.

Mundia, Mr N W. African Oral Literature, Univ of Zambia, Lusaka, Zambia.

Nare, Dr L. BICAM, Nairobi, Kenya.

Ntshinga, Mrs T N. Dept of African Languages, Unisa, South Africa.

Nussbaum, Dr Stan. Global Mapping, Colorado Springs, USA.

Oduyoye, Mr Modupe. Ibadan, Nigeria.

Olayinka, Ms Bolaji. Dept of Religious Studies, Obafemi Awolowo Univ, Ile-Ife, Nigeria.

Opoku, Prof Kofi. Dept of Religion, Lafayette College, Easton Pa, USA.

Penfield, Dr Joyce. Graduate School of Education, Rutgers Univ, New Jersey, USA.

Saayman, Prof Willem. Dept of Mission Studies, Unisa, Pretoria.

Sumbwa, Mr G N. School of Education, Univ of Zambia, Lusaka, Zambia.

Van Heerden, Prof Willie. Dept Old Testament, Unisa, Pretoria.

Wanjohi, Dr Gerald. ex-Univ of Nairobi, Kenya.

The distinctive baobab tree is characteristic of the bush in large parts of Africa and Madagascar. It generally grows to achieve huge proportions. In many African languages there are proverbs which can be paraphrased as follows: 'No single individual can embrace the baobab tree', meaning that human wisdom is so great that it would be presumptuous and arrogant of a single individual to claim to have mastered it all. In order to master human wisdom, expressed so trenchantly in African proverbs, we need one another's assistance. The participants in The Pew Research Project on African Proverbs co-operated with each other in this spirit, and we now present the results to you, to assist us even further in 'embracing the baobab tree'.

Embracing the Baobab tree is the fifth volume in the African Proverbs Series. The first four volumes deal with proverbs in specific African languages, and the Series Editor is Prof John Mbiti. This volume contains papers read at the Interdisciplinary Symposium at Unisa and was edited by Prof Willem Saayman and not Prof John Mbiti.

Introduction

Willem Saayman

'Proverbs are never out of season,' says one of the leading paremiologists of our time, Wolgang Mieder (*Proverbs are never out of season. Popular wisdom in the modern age*. OUP, Oxford, 1993). Proverbs provide 'the salt for the stew', says an African proverb found in many African tongues – and anybody who has had the misfortune of having to gulp down a saltless stew will know immediately what is meant by it. Really wise human beings, say the Ga/Akan/Dangme (and probably many other African peoples), speak in proverbs – the very epitome of erudition. But is this still the case? Certainly any social scientist who has done research among African peoples will testify to the enormous importance of African proverbs in African cultures and societies. But do proverbs still occupy this place of honour in Africa? Or have the tumultuous processes of urbanisation, industrialisation and westernisation simply swept away this 'romanticised relic of the unblemished pre-colonial past'?

The Pew Charitable Trusts sponsored a three-year research project on African Proverbs from 1993 to 1996. The project was coordinated by Dr Stan Nussbaum, a specialist on African Initiated Churches, from Global Mapping International in Colorado Springs, USA. Some of the questions quoted above, and many others besides, inspired this research project. Dr Nussbaum himself is a theologian and this probably had much to do with the reality that most of the board members and many of the participating researchers came from a theological or religious studies background. It is also true, though, that missionary theologians were prominent in the group of scientists who originally initiated proverb research in Africa (very often in an unstructured and sometimes perhaps even very unsophisticated form). The involvement of theologians and religious studies scholars is therefore natural.

The project set out to produce two important series of publications: *Proverbs collections* in various African languages (with John Mbiti as series editor), and *Proverbs for preaching* in monograph form (with Joshua Kudadjie as series editor). Both these series are published by Unisa Press

(and will also be available on CD-ROM). The showcase event of the project, however, was the Interdisciplinary Symposium on The African Proverb in the Twenty-First Century, which took place at the University of South Africa (Unisa) in Pretoria from 2 October to 7 October 1995. The various participants in the project were brought together for intense plenary and group discussions. Eventually 35 scholars from 11 African countries – from the north (Egypt) to the south (South Africa and Lesotho), and from the east (Ethiopia) to the west (Burkina Faso and Ghana) – attended the symposium. We also had a few expert resource people from America and Europe. The present volume is the fruit of that symposium.

One of the most exciting findings of the research project has been the discovery, all over Africa, of individual scholars working, often in isolation, on exciting dimensions of proverb scholarship (and we do not claim to have discovered all of them yet). One of the main aims of The Pew Project was to bring these scholars together as far as possible, to put proverb scholarship in Africa into continental focus, and to make its results widely available. We were eventually forced to concentrate largely on Anglophone Africa, for practical and not for philosophical reasons. What we found in Anglophone Africa was so extensive that our resources could not be stretched to include Francophone and Lusophone Africa as well. Indeed, one of the primary findings of the project can therefore be said to be the necessity for similar projects in Francophone and Lusophone Africa.

Because of the immense scope of the theme, and because we literally did not know how many scholars were working on proverb research in Africa, we did not lay down very strict research parameters. As a result, the papers read at the symposium cover a very wide thematic field. The division into sections must therefore not be read as watertight compartments of clearly substantiated research topics. It is much less than this, no more than an attempt by the editor to present the papers in some ordered form which may make reading and using them somewhat easier. We are particularly aware that there are huge areas of social reality which we did not touch upon, and we would very much like to know about scholars working in areas of proverb research not covered in this volume.

The volume starts with an article by a scholar who is arguably among the top paremiologists worldwide today: Wolfgang Mieder. He sketches the worldwide context, against which background our African proverb scholarship functions. Mieder points out at least two very important areas that need urgent

attention: the collection of African proverbs (paremiography), and the study of various dimensions of proverbs (paremiology). As he rightly points out, these two activities are generally two sides of the same coin, and they should therefore not be artificially separated.

The symposium in Pretoria actually provided us with an opportunity to take stock of the status of both paremiography and paremiology in Africa (although the two forthcoming series of publications are meant to address the paremiographic part in more detail). Still, then, the papers read at the symposium represent the first attempt to carry further paremiographic and paremiologic research in Anglophone Africa. The various contributions must therefore be read in this light, as the first-fruits of a rich promise, imperfect in many respects, but promising a rich reward to those who persevere on the route we have taken with The Pew Project.

Because this was such a preliminary effort, one could expect a fair degree of variation in the standard of the respective contributions. Some papers were read by professional proverb scholars (whether linguists, historians, religious scientists, etc); and some were read by practitioners in many other fields who made the discovery that their practical task of health work, development work, teaching or evangelisation could not be successfully accomplished without taking very seriously the role of proverbs in many African societies. The Administrative Board of The Pew Proverbs Project deliberately set out to include these (and indeed other) groups in the discussions at the symposium, because it was an exploratory exercise and we suspected that they would all be able to make valuable contributions.

The division into certain sections is, as I have already stated, very tentative and preliminary. We did not prescribe themes for sections in the programme, and had to make our division on the basis of the central thrust of the participants' work once we had received their proposed topics. It seemed to me as editor that the following areas received most attention: *philosophical and methodological considerations*, both from a First World and an African perspective; *proverbs and various societal dimensions* (culture, socialisation, morality, education, etc); *proverbs and religion in general*, but also African Traditional Religions in particular (religion is of course a 'societal dimension', but it functioned so prominently that I considered a separate section justifiable); *proverbs and Christianity*; and *proverbs and the role of women in African society*. I wish to stress very strenuously that these divisions are open-ended, and should in no way be interpreted as watertight compartments.

The ease with which participants took part in discussions across the whole range of topics emphasised the unity of function and holistic role of proverbs (and proverb research) in African society.

Perhaps the most interesting point of contention to come out of the discussions deals with the survival possibilities of African proverbs. Some researchers (for example Mkuchu) state clearly that the younger generation is no longer so well versed in proverbs as the older generation. Can one therefore say that proverbs are intimately linked to a rural, pastoral, pre-colonial culture? Others, such as Mieder and Ntshinga, argue that proverbs are equally adaptable in a context of urbanisation and industrialisation. Dalfovo argues that the continued presence of African proverbs is of the utmost importance for the existence and study of *African* philosophy; indeed, it is clear that he regards an interest in proverbs as a healthy counterbalance to the phenomenon of (basically Western) mass culture sweeping through Africa and the world, destroying certain important cultural particularities. Is it therefore worthwhile (indeed, essential) to channel resources to proverb scholarship, as in Africa too in the twenty-first century 'proverbs will never be out of season', and will still be supplying 'the salt for the stew'? The consensus of the participants, expressed implicitly or explicitly, is clearly positive, but the last word on the subject has most definitely not been spoken.

Another area where more research is clearly needed deals with the use of proverbs in Christian evangelisation. Can African proverbs be substituted on a one-to-one basis for biblical (or for that matter Quranic and Talmudic) proverbs and proverbial sayings? There is no doubt that proverbs can play a major role in African evangelisation – as George Cotter and Pat Bennett, for example, illustrate. In an era when primary evangelisation need no longer be the primary concern in church and theology in Africa, though, can proverbs make a meaningful contribution to contextualisation and inculturation?[1] Various participants point out that proverbs not only arose in a specfic context, but are also dependent for their interpretation on contextual circumstances. And if proverbs indeed adapt so well in circumstances of urbanisation and industrialisation (as Mieder and Ntshinga argue) – two important social phenomena in Africa at this time – they could indeed be of invaluable importance in the contextualisation of the Christian gospel. The same holds true for inculturation. Mkuchu, for example, emphasises the role of proverbs in *en*culturation, which tends to indicate to me that they can also be important tools in *in*culturation. We have had too few papers on this important topic at

the congress to come to a conclusion which might hold true over a fairly wide area of Africa. This is another area then which needs further investigation.

The question whether proverbs are essentially means towards conserving the status quo as much as possible, or whether they can be legitimate agents of change in society, is mostly addressed indirectly by many of our participants. On this issue also, the jury is still out, and no verdict can be proclaimed. One vexing area seems to be the area of proverbs and their presentation of the being and role of women in society. It is remarkable that we had so few papers dealing explicitly with this topic – and the two we had were both written by women. Some of the male authors did touch on the issue, mainly in attempts to explain away clearly subordinate positions prescribed for women in African proverbs, or to re-interpret these proverbs in a way which could make them liberating and inclusive in our new contexts. I leave it to the readers to judge for themselves how successful these attempts were. At the moment the bias seems to me to be firmly towards the role of social conservator.

A word needs to be said about formal aspects of this publication. Communication in Africa is still very difficult; it is much easier to communicate with someone in North America or Russia, for example, than to communicate with a fellow African in Ethiopia or Burkina Faso. It was therefore not possible to communicate on a sustained basis with participants before the symposium, and to supply guidelines about a specific reference technique, bibliography or style. It was equally impossible to correspond on a sustained basis with participants after the symposium, and most of the papers had to be published as they were read. With the consent of the administrative board, I therefore decided to publish the papers in the style and with the reference technique in which they were submitted. This will undoubtedly be a source of frustration in cases where fuller (or clearer) documentation would have been a great benefit. I feel, however, that making these research results available is of such importance that it overrides the importance of a unified style of presentation at this time.

In conclusion, I wish to express our indebtedness to the Research Institute for Theology and Religion at Unisa, and particularly to Mrs Jansie Kilian, for their help in making the symposium a reality. I also wish to thank Unisa Press for their willingness to publish the results of The Pew Research Project. And finally I wish to express our thanks to The Pew Charitable Trusts, whose generous grant made possible both the symposium and this publication.

Note

1 There are various important differences in the theological understanding of the origins and praxis of *contextualisation* and *inculturation*. I do not wish to enter into that debate here, but fully aware of the dangerous generalisation of my statement, would rather indicate that the two concepts describe remarkably similar theological processes, where *contextualisation* is the term preferred by Protestants, and *inculturation* the term preferred by Roman Catholics.

PART I

Philosophical, paremiological and methodological considerations

Modern paremiology in retrospect and prospect

Wolfgang Mieder

Any attempt to describe the present state of proverb scholarship and its desiderata for the future must of necessity look back on past accomplishments. The interest in proverbs can, after all, be traced back to the earliest Sumerian cuneiform tablets and the philosophical writings of Aristotle. Renaissance scholars such as Erasmus of Rotterdam and modern folklorists such as Archer Taylor have all built on previous research as they put forth their own collections and studies of proverbs. There is indeed an impressive history of the two major aspects of proverb scholarship: the collection of proverbs (paremiography) and the study of proverbs (paremiology). Naturally these two branches are merely two sides of the same coin, and some of the very best research on proverbs combines the two in perfect harmony. Although the identification of traditional texts as proverbs and their arrangement in collections of various types are of paramount importance, proverb scholars have always known that the interpretation of their use in oral or written speech acts is of equal significance.

The following remarks can only scratch the proverbial surface of the retrospective and prospective aspects of modern paremiology. Yet I will attempt to address some major issues of past, present, and future proverb research while giving representative examples of recent scholarship that can serve as models for what lies ahead. My remarks are divided into three major categories: fundamental resources, such as special journals, essay volumes, and bibliographies dedicated to proverb research; the status of extant proverb collections and the direction of paremiography in the future; and the impressive results of twentieth century proverb scholarship and a glimpse of the desiderata for paremiology as we enter the twenty-first century.

Proverb journals, essay volumes and bibliographies

The deep-rooted interest in proverbs throughout the world is well-attested in a number of international bibliographies as well as the 25 issues from 1965 to 1975 of the 'old' *Proverbium*, edited by Matti Kuusi *et al* in Helsinki and now available as a two-volume reprint edited by Mieder (Bern: Lang, 1987);

the short-lived *Proverbium Paratum*, edited by Vilmos Voigt *et al* from 1980 to 1989 in only four issues in Budapest; the 'new' *Proverbium: Yearbook of International Scholarship*, edited by Mieder since 1984; the Spanish annual *Paremia*, edited by Julia Sevilla Muñoz since 1993 in Madrid; and the innovative, electronically published *De Proverbio*, edited by Teodor Flonta since 1994 in Tasmania, Australia. These publications have brought international scholars closer together than ever before, and it is conceivable that other such yearbooks might be started in other countries. A proverb yearbook devoted to African proverbs is doubtlessly a good idea, and the Japan Society for Proverb Studies might well enlarge its impressive newsletter into a full-fledged yearbook that addresses Japanese proverbs and those of other nationalities in Asia.[1] There are certainly enough interested scholars to fill the pages of such publications with valuable interpretive essays, collections, bibliographies, and book reviews. In any case, these yearbooks would enhance the regional, national, and international study of proverbs and assure us of the highest quality of comparatively oriented synchronic and diachronic proverb scholarship in a global environment.

It has also become quite fashionable to publish volumes of proverb essays by different authors. There are those which give an overview of aspects of paremiology, ranging from definitional, structural, and semiotic studies to analyses of the origin, history, and dissemination of individual proverbs, and from their use in literary works or psychological testing to their depiction in art as well as the modern mass media. Alan Dundes and I edited such a volume entitled *The wisdom of many: essays on the proverb* (New York: Garland, 1981; reprinted Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994) that included essays from the first half of this century. On the other hand, my new volume of *Wise words: essays on the proverb* (New York: Garland, 1994) features only essays that were published after 1970. Together these two 'casebooks' present 40 of the most important and representative essays written in English on a broad array of anthropological, folkloristic, historical, linguistic, literary, philological, psychological, and sociological subjects. While the scope of three additional volumes by Grigorii L'vovich Permiakov (ed), *Paremiologicheskie issledovaniia: Sbornik statei* (Moskva: Nauka, 1984)[2]; Annette Sabban and Jan Wirrer (eds), *Sprichwörter und Redensarten im interkulturellen Vergleich* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1991); and Cristina Vallini (ed), *La pratica e*

la grammatica: Viaggio nella linguistica del proverbio (Napoli: Istituto Universitario Orientale, 1989) is also deliberately interdisciplinary and comparative, there are others that address specific questions: Naiade Anido (ed.), *Des proverbes ... à l'affut* (Paris: Publications Langues'O, 1983 [with articles on French, African, Brazilian, Mexican, and Lebanese proverbs]); Peter Grzybek and Wolfgang Eismann (eds.), *Semiotische Studien zum Sprichwort. Simple forms reconsidered I* (Tübingen: Narr, 1984); and François Suard and Claude Buridant (eds), *Richesse du proverbe*. Vol 1: *Le proverbe au Moyen Age*. Vol 2: *Typologie et fonctions* (Lille: Université de Lille, 1984). Some years ago I edited two volumes that assembled the major German proverb scholarship of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, namely *Deutsche Sprichwörterforschung des 19 Jahrhunderts* (Bern: Lang, 1984) and *Ergebnisse der Sprichwörterforschung* (Bern: Lang, 1978). I would like to plead here for similar essay collections for other logical linguistic or subject areas. It would be quite useful to have such volumes of major scholarship dedicated to African, Japanese or Spanish proverbs and to articles dealing on a cross-cultural level with misogyny, stereotypes, religion, animals, etc, in proverbs. Such studies would be welcome research tools for students and scholars of proverbs alike and would make largely unaccessible publications available in thematically packaged casebooks.[3] Naturally such essay volumes should contain informative introductions and useful bibliographies that list special collections and additional analytical studies.

Previous bibliographies of proverb collections were subsumed by Wilfrid Bonser's still valuable *Proverb literature: a bibliography of works relating to proverbs* (London: Glaisher, 1930; reprinted Nendeln/Liechtenstein: Kraus, 1967) and Otto Moll's superb *Sprichwörterbibliographie* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1958), with the latter registering over 9 000 references. My own annual 'International bibliography of new and reprinted proverb collections' which has appeared in *Proverbium: Yearbook of International Proverb Scholarship* since 1984 has by now cited 921 publications, among them some extremely important reprints of earlier collections as well as a large number of significant new national comparative collections.

As helpful as these yearly bibliographies have been, there is a definite need to assemble updated national bibliographies of proverb collections

with explanatory annotations. A superb two-volume example of such a book is Anatolii Mikhailovich Bushui's *Paremiologiia Uzbekistana* (Samarkand: Samarkandskii gosudarstvennyi pedagogicheskii institut, 1978 amd 1980). It registers 840 annotated paremiographical and paremiological publications of the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic in central Asia. Bushui includes books and articles on proverbs, proverbial expressions, proverbial comparisons, clichés, idioms, and phraseology in general. There are also detailed name, subject, and proverb indices that include sections on Russian, German, French, and Latin proverbs. This is without doubt one of the most complete bibliographies for a particular geographical and ethnic area, a model to be emulated for other regions and languages. There are also smaller but valuable bibliographies such as Shirley L Arora's 'A Critical Bibliography of Mexican American proverbs,' *Aztlán*, 13 (1982), 71–80, or Katherine Luomala's 'A bibliographical survey of collections of Hawaiian sayings,' *Proverbium*, 2 (1985), 279–306. Many more such specialised bibliographies are needed, but it is also high time that a critically annotated international bibliography of the world's major proverb collections should be put together. As paremiographers work more and more comparatively, they need to know which collections are the most reliable and inclusive for as many languages as possible. A definite desideratum, for example, would be an annotated bibliography of all extant proverb collections, small and large, for every African language, which would enable scholars to study the dissemination of proverbs thoughout the African continent.

The bibliographical status of paremiology is by comparison with that of paremiography in a better state because of my *International proverb scholarship: an annotated bibliography*, 3 volumes. (New York: Garland, 1982, 1990, and 1993), in which 4 599 books, dissertations and articles have been registered with detailed and critical comments as well as extensive name, subject and proverb indices. These massive volumes contain the major accomplishments of proverb scholars in the past two hundred years, and the most recent publications are listed in my yearly 'International proverb scholarship: an updated bibliography' in *Proverbium* with the impressive number of over 200 entries per year. But this is not to say that specialised annotated bibliographies are not needed, for which the *Catalogo de bibliografia paremiologica española* (Valencia: ECVSA., 1992) by José de Jaime Gómez and José María Jaime Lorén, and my *African proverb*

scholarship: an annotated bibliography (Burlington, Vermont: University of Vermont, 1994) serve as examples and models. There are also some specialised bibliographies for certain specific subject matters, namely my 'International bibliography of explanatory essays on proverbs and proverbial expressions containing names,' *Names*, 24 (1976), 253–304, and Henry V Besso's 'Judeo-Spanish proverbs: an analysis and bibliography,' in Marc D Angel (ed), *Studies in Sephardic culture* (New York: Sepher-Hermon, 1980), pages 21–55. But many additional specialised bibliographies on such matters as misogyny in proverbs,[4] worldview expressed through proverbs, the weather in proverbs, God (or religion) in proverbs, etc, would be welcome. The list of possibilities is endless, and the indices included in my volumes of *International proverb scholarship* will help scholars to find those publications that include rich bibliographical information (check under the entry 'bibliography'). Nevertheless, it will always be a worthwhile service to put together additional bibliographies.

Proverb collections and the future of paremiography

While it is both reasonable and desirable that paremiographers create new proverb collections, diachronically oriented scholars will be pleased to know that many of the major collections of earlier centuries have appeared as invaluable reprints. Particularly for some of the major European languages, this fortunately took place before the present financial crunch experienced by libraries around the world. Thus most of the Danish, English, French, German, Italian, and Spanish proverb collections from the late fifteenth century onwards are available as reprints. This is not the place to comment on individual reprinted volumes of these and other languages, since they are all listed in the annual bibliography of *Proverbium*.[5] Instead two major events in European paremiography, one completed and the other in the early stages of publication, should be mentioned. There is the gargantuan effort of Hans Walther, who has assembled approximately 150 000 Latin proverbs and their variants from the Middle Ages through the seventeenth century in his seminal nine-volume *Proverbia sententiaeque Latinitatis ac recentioris aevi* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1963–1986). Since many of the proverbs were common throughout Europe either in the Latin original or through loan translations into the vernacular languages, these volumes

represent a unique research tool for all historical and comparative paremiographers. For the vernacular languages of the Middle Ages, another giant research project has just reached publication. A team of scholars has been working since 1964 in Berne, Switzerland, on a multi-volume *Thesaurus proverbiorum medii aevi* (TPMA) based on the materials of the Swiss paremiographer Samuel Singer (1860–1948).[6] The first volume of this *Lexikon der Sprichwörter des germanisch-romanischen Mittelalters* has just been published by the prestigious Walter de Gruyter publishing company in Berlin (1995, A-Birne, 488 pp). While the major language of this lexicon is German, texts in Greek, Latin, French, Provençal, Italian, Catalan, Spanish, Portuguese, Icelandic, Swedish, Danish, English, and Dutch are cited. On its completion, this multi-volume research tool will unlock the intricacies of medieval proverbs, leaving paremiographers with the hope that similar mammoth projects might be undertaken for the proverbs of later centuries and other linguistic families of the world. With the use of the computer and proper funding we might be able to accomplish such desirable tasks in the future.

In the meantime we definitely need single-language historical dictionaries based on the rigid and sensible lexicographical classification system developed by the American paremiographer *par excellence* Bartlett Jere Whiting in his celebrated and massive *Proverbs, sentences, and proverbial phrases from english writings mainly before 1500* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1958), and his many subsequent Anglo-American proverb collections. Whiting actually followed the methodology of Morris Palmer Tilley's *A dictionary of the proverbs in England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1950), and both were followed by an unequalled four-volume Polish collection *Nowa ksiega przyslow i wyrazen przyslowiowych polskich* (Warszawa: Panstwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1969–1978) edited by Julian Krzyzanowski and Stanis aw Swirko. These collections are historical dictionaries in which the individual proverbs and proverbial expressions are arranged alphabetically according to key words. For each proverb the editors supply historical references from the Middle Ages on, and often include the earlier classical and/or biblical references. At the end of such historical monographs on individual proverbs, cross-references to other proverb collections of the language involved are cited as well. Even though this methodology for major

historical proverb collections has long been established, it is being followed more or less exclusively only in the Anglo-American world and has resulted in several major proverb dictionaries.[7]

There is nothing like this for the German language, and the same is true for most other languages as well. A major goal of serious paremiographers must be the establishment of such historical collections. The time-consuming effort might be eased by scholars working in teams, as with Arvo Krikmann, Ingrid Sarv and their colleagues, who have published a seminal five-volume national Estonian proverb collection, *Eesti vanasonad* (Tallinn: Eesti Raamat, 1980-1988).[8] On a much smaller scale, there are also such modern dialect collections as Paul F Portmann's *Di letschti Chue tuet s Törli zue. Schweizerdeutsche Sprichwörter* (Frauenfeld: Huber, 1983); Christine Barras's *Les proverbes dans les patois de la suisse romande* (Dissertation, Université de Neuchâtel, 1984); and *De Brabantse Spreekwoorden* (Waalre: Hein Mandosstichting, 1988), edited by Hein Mandos and Miep Mandos-van de Pol. Special mention might also be made of Mark Glazer's *A dictionary of Mexican American proverbs* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood, 1987), which includes Chicano proverbs and their variants collected from informants in the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas and reflects a corpus of proverbs in actual use by an ethnic group in the United States. We also have Shirley L Arora's valuable collection *Proverbial comparisons and related expressions in Spanish* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), based on field research in the Los Angeles area. At present this scholar of Hispanic proverbs is presently working on a major compilation of Spanish proverbs collected from informants in that city.

European paremiographers have published several major international proverb collections in the past few years. Matti Kuusi, in cooperation with seven other scholars, took the lead with the exemplary collection *Proverbia Septentrionalia: 900 Balto-Finnic proverb types with Russian, Baltic, German and Scandinavian Parallels* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeaketemia, 1985). This significant synchronic comparative work registers the common proverbs of 'the six Balto-Finnic peoples of Finno-Ugrian origin–the Finns, Karelians, Estonians, Votes, Vespians and Livonians–which form a linguistically and geographically unified group between the Scandinavians, Balts and Russians' (p.8). The proverb types are cited in English, and the prov-

erbs in their original languages under each type are arranged on the basis of their distribution in the Balto-Finnic languages, always beginning with those proverbs occurring in all six languages and ending with those found in only one. Where possible, a Russian, Baltic, German and Scandinavian parallel of the proverb type are cited. After the Balto-Finnic variants, bibliographical sources are listed. Of much value are also Gabriel Gheorghe's *Proverbele românesti si proverbele lumii romanice. Studia comparativ* (Bucuresti: Editura Albatros, 1986), which lists 360 Rumanian proverbs with their Romance language parallels; Gyula Paczolay's *A comparative dictionary of Hungarian, Estonian, German, English, Finnish and Latin proverbs with an appendix of Cheremis and Zyryan* (Veszprém: VEAB, 1986) with about 680 Hungarian proverbs and their equivalents in the languages mentioned in the title; Kazys Grigas' *Patarliu paraleles: Lietuviu patarlés su latviu, baltarusiu, rusu, lenku, vokieciu, anglu, lotynu, prancuzu, ispanu atitikmenimis* (Vilnius: Vaga, 1987) with 611 international proverb types based on Lithuanian proverbs with Latvian, Belorussian, Russian, Polish, German, English, Latin, French and Spanish parallels; and Emanuel Strauss' massive *Dictionary of European proverbs*, 3 volumes (London: Routledge, 1994), with its 1804 proverbs in dozens of languages.[9] A definite paremiographical desideratum is a comparative dictionary of Spanish language proverbs from Spain as well as South and North America. Many collections from Spain, Mexico, Argentina, etc, already exist, but they need to be fused into a multi-volume dictionary which will show at a glance the Hispanic proverb stock and its dissemination to many parts of the world.

So much for the Euro-American picture, but how do matters look for the many languages of the African continent? Missionaries and anthropologists have long collected proverbs indigenous to certain African tribes, and this work has resulted in many valuable collections. Of special merit are Cyril L. Sibusiso Nyembezi, *Zulu Proverbs* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1963); M A Hamutyinei and A B Plangger, *Tsumo-Shumo: Shona Proverbial Lore and Wisdom* (Gwelo, Rhodesia: Mambo, 1974); Pierre Crépeau and Simon Bizimana, *Proverbes du Rwanda* (Tervuren, Belgium: Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale, 1979); Albert Scheven, *Swahili Proverbs* (Washington, D C : University Press of America, 1981); Francis M Rodegem, *Paroles de sagesse au Burandi* (Leuven: Peeters, 1983); Oyekan Owomoyela, *'A Ki i': Yoruba proscriptive and prescriptive proverbs*

(Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1988); and Hans-Ingolf Weier, *Luba Sprichwörter*, 2 volumes (Köln: Köppe, 1992). Special mention, however, must be made of Matti Kuusi's collection *Ovambo proverbs with African parallels* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1970), since this scholar has provided comparative African commentaries to the Ovambo proverbs. While Kuusi admits that his references to African parallels are limited, his admonition deserves the attention of African paremiographers: 'The number of common African proverbs appears proportionately smaller than that of common European or Eurasian proverbs, but the establishment of a common Bantu tradition and that of the most general African proverbs provides a necessary basis for the determination of whether or not the peoples of the three ancient continents have a common heritage of proverbs' (p 13). The time has surely come to assemble major comparative proverb collections based on the numerous previously published collections of small linguistic groups. Research teams need to work on this major task making use of computer technology. Only through such work will questions regarding the geographical distribution and commonality of African proverbs be answered. What proverbs are known throughout Africa? How old are they? Are they indigenous to that continent? How do they relate to the common stock of European proverbs that were disseminated by missionaries, etc.? The first step should be the establishment of a computer bank of all African proverbs collected thus far. Although there are valuable individual collections and studies of African proverbs, a comparative analysis of all these African texts is highly desirable.

A similar picture arises for the Asian languages, which also have a long and complex history of a rich common proverb stock. There are clearly numerous proverb collections in the native languages that are, unfortunately, inaccessible to most Western scholars.[10] But such collections as Young H Yoo, *Wisdom of the Far East* (Washington, DC: Far Eastern Research & Publications Center, 1972) and Gyula Paczolay, *European, Far-Eastern and Some Asian Proverbs: a comparison of European, Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Vietnamese and other Asian proverbs* (Veszprém: Central Library of the University of Veszprém, 1994) have shown that many proverbs are common to the Asian languages. There are also a few proverbs expressing the same idea in an identical or closely related form in the European and Asian languages, among them such standard texts as 'Constant dropping

wears the stone', 'There is no smoke without fire' and 'Strike while the iron is hot', etc. A research team and sophisticated computer technology will be able to establish major comparative proverb dictionaries for the Asian languages, and the same is true for the Indic, Arabic and others. Such synchronic (and possibly also diachronic) comparative collections with their scholarly apparatus of indices, frequency analyses, sources, geographical distribution, etc, are of major importance in trying to find international proverb types. Collections of this type will advance the structural, semantic, and semiotic studies of scholars like Grigorii L'vovich Permiakov and Matti Kuusi, who have been searching for an international type system of proverbs.[11]

There is one final desideratum for prospective paremiography. Grigorii L'vovich Permiakov (1919–1983), one of the greatest theoretical paremiologists of this century, saw some very important pragmatic applications of paremiography. Utilising his paremiological experiment conducted in Moscow in 1970, he was able to establish the general currency of 1 494 phaseological units among modern inhabitants of that city.[12] Included were 268 proper proverbs, and the rest of the texts were proverbial expressions, proverbial comparisons, wellerisms, fables, anecdotes, riddles, slogans, weather signs, superstitions, fairy tales, oaths, etc. Permiakov's list shows clearly that many long folk narratives have currency as short phraseological remnants (allusions).[13] All of these texts are part of the general cultural literacy of Russians. Native as well as foreign speakers of Russian need to know them in order to communicate effectively in that language. Permiakov subsequently established a so-called 'paremiological minimum' of 300 such texts based on this experiment and published it with an explanatory introduction and many notes as *300 obshcheupotrebitel'nykh russkikh poslovits i pogovorok* (Moskva: Russkii iazyk, 1985). German and Bulgarian translations have appeared that enable foreign language instructors to teach the most frequent Russian proverbs, proverbial expressions, proverbial comparisons, etc, and to assure their students' fluency in the most commonly used Russian proverbial minimum.

Similar paremiological minima of the most frequently used phraseological units of all the national languages should now be established by paremiographers. (This is being done at present for Croatian, English, German, and Hungarian)[14]. Demoscopic research will help to determine which

texts should be included.[15] Many proverbs of classical, biblical or medieval origin will belong to the proverbial minima of many European languages. But there will still be room for national proverbs among a list of about 300 texts. For those languages for which there are still no satisfactory historical dictionaries, the texts of such a proverbial minimum would comprise the logical starting point. In any case, it would greatly benefit foreign language instruction if paremiographers would establish paremiological minima for many individual languages. We would also finally have a much better idea as to which of the thousands of proverbs listed in the older collections are still in written and oral use.[16] Paremiography cannot remain a science that looks primarily backwards and works only with texts of times gone by. Modern paremiographers can and should also assemble proverb collections that include the texts of the twentieth century,[17] as for example *A dictionary of American proverbs* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) edited by Stewart Kingsbury, Kelsie Harder and Wolfgang Mieder. We also need modern collections like my three volumes of so-called *Antisprichwörter* (Wiesbaden: Verlag für deutsche Sprache, 1982 and 1985; Wiesbaden: Quelle & Meyer, 1989), which document the modern use of standard German proverbs and their variants in recent literary works, graffiti, advertisements, caricatures, cartoons, etc. While impressive progress has been made in paremiography this century, particularly in the past dozen years or so, many clear challenges still lie ahead to be taken up by nationally and/or internationally oriented paremiographers.

Modern proverb scholarship and desiderata for paremiology

Anybody interested in consciously using or even collecting proverbs will sooner or later also begin to think about what makes proverbs 'click', that is, what differentiates these short texts from normal utterances or such subgenres as proverbial expressions, proverbial comparisons, twin formulas, winged words (literary quotations), aphorisms and wellerisms, etc.[18] When inquiring about the origin, history, dissemination, language, structure, meaning, use and function of such phraseological units, one enters the realm of proverb scholarship or paremiology, as it is called by its Greek technical term in differentiation from the more limited concerns of proverb collecting or paremiography. While scholars from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds could doubtless cite a number of scholars to show the historical

development of paremiology in their respective countries, it is perhaps fair to say that the great German paremiographer Karl Friedrich Wilhelm Wander (1803–1879), to whom we owe the five massive volumes *Deutsches Sprichwörter-Lexikon* (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1867–1880; reprinted Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1964), was also the first 'modern' paremiologist with his encompassing study *Das Sprichwort, betrachtet nach Form und Wesen, für Schule und Leben, als Einleitung zu einem volksthümlichen Sprichwörterschatz* (Hirschberg: Zimmer, 1836; reprint edited by Wolfgang Mieder. Bern: Lang, 1983).[19] In England we also have an early volume *On the lessons of proverbs* (London: Parker, 1853) by the Archbishop of Canterbury Richard Chenevix Trench (1807–1886), which in its many English and American editions became a standard work for paremiologists interested in the definition, origin, form, style, content, morality and theology of proverbs. Two outstanding inclusive studies of the proverb in the early part of the present century are F Edward Hulme, *Proverb lore: being a historical study of the similarities, contrasts, topics, meanings, and other facets of proverbs, truisms, and pithy sayings, as expressed by the people of many lands and times* (London: Stock, 1902; repinted Detroit: Gale, 1968) and Friedrich Seiler, *Deutsche Sprichwörterkunde* (München: Beck, 1922, rpt. 1967). There are similar books in other languages, to be sure: Matti Kuusi, *Parömiologische Betrachtungen* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1957)[20]; Lutz Röhrich and Mieder's *Sprichwort* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1977); Jean Cauvin, *Comprendre: Les proverbes* (Issy les Moulineaux: Les Classiques Africains, 1981); Cezar Tabarcea, *Poetica proverbului* (Bucuresti: Minerva, 1982); Julia Sevilla Muñoz, *Hacia una aproximación conceptual de las paremias francesas y españolas* (Madrid: Editorial Complutense, 1988); and Katsuaki Takeda, *Kotowaza no Retorikku* (Tokyo: Kaimeisha, 1992).[21] But paremiologists are fortunate in having one seminal study dedicated to international paremiology in an accessible language which must be regarded as a 'classic' and hitherto unsurpassed treatise of the subject. If there ever were a 'bible' of proverb scholarship, this book is it by any standard of comparison.

I am speaking, of course, of Archer Taylor's book *The proverb* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1931; reprinted as *The proverb and an index to 'The proverb'*. Hatboro, Pennsylvania: Folklore Associates, 1962; now reprinted. with an introduction and bibliography by

Wolfgang Mieder. Bern: Lang, 1985). For over sixty years this small book of a mere 223 pages by the internationally acclaimed American scholar Archer Taylor (1890–1973) has guided scholars and students around the world in their proverb studies, and its pages are replete with numerous suggestions and desiderata for further research. In short but pregnant chapters, Taylor presents a complete overview of the rich field of paremiology. The first section concerns itself with the origins of the proverb, and the individual chapters deal with the problems of definition, metaphorical proverbs, proverbial types, variations, proverbs based on narratives, proverbs and folk-verse, proverbs and literature, loan translations, biblical proverbs, and classical proverbs. In the second section on the content of proverbs, Taylor analyses customs and superstitions reflected in proverbs, historical proverbs, legal proverbs, blasons populaires (that is stereotypes), weather proverbs, medical proverbs, conventional phrases, and proverbial prophecies.[22] The third section addresses primarily the style of proverbs (metre, metaphor, personification, parallelism, rhyme, pun, etc), but there are also chapters on dialogue proverbs, epigrammatic proverbs, national and ethnic traits, ethical values, obscene proverbs, and a review of proverbs in European literature. The fourth section is divided into three chapters devoted to various aspects of proverbial phrases, wellerisms, and proverbial comparisons.[23] The book, filled with examples from many languages, contains generous bibliographical references, and three years after its publication Taylor published an invaluable 105-page *An index to 'The proverb'* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1934), which has been included in both the 1962 and 1985 reprints. There can be no doubt that this book belongs in every research library of the world and on the bookshelf of every paremiologist.

With Taylor as doyen of proverb studies in the United States in the 1930s, paremiology flourished there to a remarkable degree. Taylor's many additional publications were at least in part republished in two essay volumes: Archer Taylor, *Comparative studies in folklore. Asia–Europe–America* (Taipei: The Orient Cultural Service, 1972) and Archer Taylor, *Selected writings on proverbs*, edited by Wolfgang Mieder (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1975). Taylor's friend, and at times co-author, Bartlett Jere Whiting (born 1904) rose to equal heights both as a paremiographer and paremiologist during the second quarter of the twentieth

century and remains there today. His fundamental studies on the origin (1931), nature (1932), and study (1939) of proverbs have recently been edited by Joseph Harris and Wolfgang Mieder under the title of *When evensong and morrowsong accord: three essays on the proverb* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Department of English and American Literature and Language, Harvard University, 1994); a bibliography of Whiting's publications is appended. The three articles in this book comprise yet another major treatise on the proverb, and Taylor's and Whiting's insights into the complexities and intricacies of proverbs are as valid today as they were some decades ago. They certainly represent the cornerstone of modern international paremiology and its future. It is of little wonder, then, that basically every serious publication on proverbs throughout the world pays homage in some form or another to these two great scholars.

For me to do the same to all the many outstanding scholars, colleagues, and friends who are at present at work as paremiologists in all corners of the world is patently impossible. But in the remaining pages I will attempt to summarise some of the major trends of recent scholarship with brief references to major publications, while at the same time focusing on some innovative studies that need to be undertaken in the future. My comments are highly selective, and no slight to any scholar, culture or language is intended by these remarks.

From ancient times to the modern age, many have attempted to solve the problem of properly defining a proverb. In fact, Archer Taylor's study of *The proverb* as a whole can be understood as an attempt to define proverbs. The same is basically true for Neal R Norrick's valuable book on *How proverbs mean: semantic studies in English proverbs* (Amsterdam: Mouton, 1985). There are also valuable shorter essays on this important topic, notably Alan Dundes, 'On the structure of the proverb,' *Proverbium*, 25 (1975), 961–973; my 'General thoughts on the nature of proverbs,' *Revista de etnografie si folclor*, 36 (1991), 151–164; and in particular Shirley L Arora, 'The perception of proverbiality,' *Proverbium*, 1 (1984), 1–38. In her seminal article, Arora argues that proverbialty depends on traditionality, currency, repetition, certain grammatical or syntactical features, metaphor, semantic markers (parallelism, paradox, irony, etc), lexical markers (archaic words, etc.), and phonic markers (rhyme, metre, alliteration, etc). The more a given statement contains such markers, the greater are its chances of being perceived as a

proverb, as has also been shown by Bronislawa Kordas in her study *Le proverbe en chinois moderne* (Taipei, Taiwan: Editions Ouyu, 1987).

Peter Grzybek and his German and Austrian colleagues have recently argued that paremiologists must work empirically to establish what proverbs in standard collections and in oral speech are known to native speakers today. It is no longer enough to define proverbs in one's study at home based on various schemes and structural models. As Grzybek and Christoph Chlosta have shown in their 'Grundlagen der empirischen Sprichwortforschung', *Proverbium*, 10 (1993), 89–128, scholars must base their studies on demographic research methods utilising questionnaires and sophisticated statistical analyses in order to establish lists of those proverbs which are actually known and continue to be in current use. This research methodology will also help to establish the proverbiality of the new proverbs of the modern age, as I have argued in my *Proverbs are never out of season: popular wisdom in the modern age* (New York: Oxford, 1993). We thus need increased global field research, from highly technological societies to those parts of the world where life continues to be based on traditional and rural life.[24] Such empirical work will, of course, also help to establish 'proverbial minima' for many languages and cultures, as I discussed above. In any case, Grzybek is absolutely correct in claiming that empirical research must be part of modern proverb scholarship.

He is also on the proverbial right track in arguing for continued interest in the 'Foundations of semiotic proverb study', *Proverbium*, 4 (1987), 39–85. Theoretical proverb scholarship has been influenced to a large degree by the semiotic studies of Grigorii L'vovich Permiakov, notably by his Russian book *Ot pogovorki do skazki: Zametki po obshchei teorii klishe* (Moskva: Nauka, 1970) and its English translation *From proverb to folk-tale: notes on the general theory of cliché* (Moscow: Nauka, 1979)[25], Peter Grzybek and Wolfgang Eismann (ed), *Semiotische Studien zum Sprichwort. Simple Forms Reconsidered I* (Tübingen: Narr, 1984), and Zoltán Kanyo, *Sprichwörter–Analyse einer Einfachen Form: Ein Beitrag zur generativen Poetik* (The Hague: Mouton, 1981). As scholars investigate the hetereosituativity, polyfunctionality and polysemanticity of proverbs as 'einfache Formen' (simple forms), it is of great significance that they pay attention to the paradigmatic, syntagmatic, logical, and structural aspects of these traditional utterances as communicative and strategic signs. Structural

analyses of texts will certainly gain in value if semiotic aspects of proverbs as linguistic and cultural signs are added to them, as Constantin Negreanu has shown in his book *Structura proverbelor românesti* (Bucuresti: Editura Stiintifica si Enciclopedica, 1983).

This is not to say that the linguistic approach to proverbs lacks in value, as David Cram has clearly shown in his article on 'The linguistic status of the proverb', *Cahiers de lexicologie*, 43 (1983), 53–71. Linguists of various schools have investigated the language, grammar, structure and form of proverbs, and they have created an entire new field of inquiry called 'phraseology' that deals with all formulaic language or phraseological units (that is, proverbs, proverbial expressions, quotations, idioms, twin formulas, etc.). It behoves narrowly focused paremiologists to pay attention to such publications as Aleksandr K Zholkowski, 'at the intersection of linguistics, paremiology and poetics', *Poetics*, 7 (1978), 309–332; Klaus Dieter Pilz, *Phraseologie* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1981); and Dmitrij Dobrovols'kij, *Phraseologie als Objekt der Universalienlinguistik* (Leipzig: Enzyklopädie, 1988).[26] The relationship between paremiology and phraseology is indeed a very close one, as Wolfgang Fleischer has shown in 'Zum Verhältnis von Parömiologie und Phraseologie', *Niederdeutsches Wort*, 31 (1991), 3–13.

The vexing problem of proverb meaning continues to occupy semantic studies. Linguists and folklorists have repeatedly attempted to explain the semantic ambiguity of proverbs, which results to a large degree from their being used in various contexts with different functions. But proverbs also act as analogies, which adds to the complexity of understanding their precise meaning in a particular speech act. Some semantic and semiotic studies along this line are by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 'Toward a Theory of Proverb Meaning', *Proverbium*, 22 (1973), 821–827; Richard P. Honeck and Clare T Kibler, 'The role of imagery, analogy, and instantiation in proverb comprehension', *Journal of Psycholinguistic Research*, 13 (1984), 393-414; Arvo Krikmann, 'On denotative indefiniteness of proverbs', *Proverbium*, 1 (1984), 47–91, and 2 (1985), 58–85; and Michael D Lieber, 'Analogic ambiguity: a paradox of proverb usage', *Journal of American Folklore*, 97 (1984), 423–441. In trying to understand the meaning of proverbs in certain contexts, we must keep in mind that they are usually employed to disambiguate complex situations and events. Yet they are paradoxically inherently ambiguous, because their meaning depends on analogy.

Proverbs as devices of disambiguation, the paradox of analogic ambiguity in proverb usage, and the socio-cultural use of proverbs in oral and written communication – all require further study by paremiologists as they map out the strategies used in the appropriate employment of seemingly simple and yet so complex proverbial utterances.

Clearly the meaning and purpose of proverbs are best revealed by actual usage in social situations. Their strategic use in communication has been effectively analysed by Kenneth Burke, 'Literature [that is, proverbs] as equipment for living," in *The philosophy of literary form: studies in symbolic action* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana University Press, 1941), pages 253–262 and Peter Seitel, 'Proverbs: a social use of metaphor', *Genre*, 2 (1969), 143–161. When one considers proverbs in context, it should not be surprising that there are such contradictory proverb pairs as 'Absence makes the heart grow fonder' and 'Out of sight, out of mind.' After all, proverbs are not universal truths but rather limited pieces of folk wisdom which are valid only in certain situations. As Kwesi Yankah explains in his article 'Do proverbs contradict?' *Folklore Forum*, 17 (1984), 2–19, the problem of contradictory proverbs exists primarily because people ignore their social context. If one deals with proverbs only as a concept of a cultural fact or truism, contradictions are easily found in any proverb repertoire. In contextual usage, however, proverbs function effectively as social strategies.[27] In fact, the meaning of any proverb is actually evident only after it has been contextualised. To put it bluntly: proverbs in collections are 'dead'. Proverbs in normal discourse are not contradictory at all, and they usually make perfect sense to the speaker and listener. After all, people don't speak in proverb pairs, unless they are 'duelling' with proverbs as a verbal contest, as Yankah shows in his invaluable study on *The proverb in the context of Akan rhetoric: a theory of proverb Praxis* (Bern: Lang, 1989).

Today it has almost become a cliché to point out that proverbs must be studied in context, but it took a long time for anthropologically oriented proverb collectors to go beyond mere texts and look at the use and function of the proverbial materials in actual speech acts. The noted anthropologist Edward Westermarck (1862–1939) began to look at proverbs from this contextual point of view in his *Wit and wisdom in Morocco. a study of native proverbs* (London: Routledge, 1930) and Cyril L Sibusiso Nyembezi followed suit with his *Zulu proverbs* (Johannesburg: Witwaterstrand

University Press, 1963). Modern scholars trained in the theoretical aspects of speech act or performance look at proverbs as part of active verbal communication. E Ojo Arewa and Alan Dundes laid the groundwork for this type of analysis with their study on '[Yoruba] Proverbs and the ethnography of speaking folklore', *American Anthropologist*, 66, part 2, no 6 (1964), 70–85, in which they looked at such questions as 'What rules govern the use of proverbs? Who is using them and to whom? On what occasions? In what places?' Similar studies also dealing with African proverbs are by Tshimpaka Yanga, 'Inside the proverbs: a sociolinguistic approach', *African Languages*, 3 (1977), 130–157; Joyce Penfield, *Communicating with Quotes [that is, proverbs]: the Igbo case* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood, 1983); and Johannes Fabian, *power and performance: ethnographic explorations through proverbial wisdom and theater in Shaba, Zaïre* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990). Two further studies on Hispanic proverbs are by Stanley H Brandes, 'The selection process in proverb use: a Spanish example', *Southern Folklore Quarterly*, 38 (1974), 167–186 and Charles L Briggs, 'The pragmatics of proverb performances in New Mexican Spanish', *American Anthropologist*, 87 (1985), 793–810. Briggs studied the oral proverb performance in Córdova, a community of about 700 inhabitants located in the mountains of northern New Mexico in the United States. From transcriptions of recorded performances, Briggs isolates eight features of proverb use: tying phrase, identity of owner, quotation-framing verb, proverb text, special association, general meaning or hypothetical situation, relevance of context, and validation of the performance. We clearly need other studies of this type, but one caveat must, unfortunately, be expressed here. While performance-oriented studies are publishable as articles, it is almost impossible to publish entire book-length collections of proverbs that contain contextual materials and commentaries. Most publishers will find such compilations too voluminous and too limited in interest, but one hopes that this situation might change some day.

Psychologists and psychiatrists have long been interested in proverbs for testing intelligence, attitudes, aptitudes, and various mental illnesses. Numerous so-called "proverbs tests" have been devised for this purpose, the best known and most commonly used of which is the Gorham Proverbs Test. It was developed by Donald R Gorham in 1956 as a tool for diagnosing schizophrenia, since schizophrenics have difficulty in understanding the

metaphors of proverbs.[28] Obviously psycho- and sociolinguistic aspects of normal comprehension of metaphors by children versus adults, native versus foreign speakers, white-collar versus blue collar workers, etc, enter into this, as has been shown in my early review article 'The use of proverbs in psychological testing', *Journal of the Folklore Institute*, 15 (1978), 45–55 and Tim B Rogers's subsequent essay on 'Psychological approaches to proverbs: a treatise on the import of context', *Canadian Folklore Canadien*, 8 (1986), 87–104.[29] In addition to psychiatrists' using proverbs tests as a diagnostic tool for mental disorders, psycholinguists like Annelies Buhofer in her study *Der Spracherwerb von phraseologischen Wortverbindungen* (Frauenfeld: Huber, 1980) have employed proverbs to study the mental development of children and the whole question of cognition and comprehension of metaphors. Proverbs have also been utilised by social psychologists as slogans in therapeutic communities for alcohol or drug addicts.[30] Much could be learned from additional studies like these regarding mental processes and psychological or sociological influence through proverbs.

Proverbs can be quite negative when they express, as many of them do, slurs or stereotypes. Such negative proverbial texts appear in the earliest proverb collections, and they are still used today despite attempts to be open-minded towards ethnic, religious, sexual, national and regional differences. Three special collections are Otto von Reinsberg-Düringsfeld, *Internationale Titulaturen* (Leipzig: Fries, 1863; reprint edited by Wolfgang Mieder. Hildesheim: Olms, 1992); Abraham A Roback, *A dictionary of international slurs* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Sci-Art, 1944; reprinted Waukesha, Wisconsin: Maledicta Press, 1979); and Richard Spears, *slang and euphemisms* (Middle Village, New York: David, 1981). Alan Dundes presents an excellent study of national slurs or 'blasons populaires' in his 'Slurs international: folk comparisons of ethnicity and national character," *Southern Folklore Quarterly*, 39 (1975), 15–38, dealing with such topics as stereotypes, national character, ethnocentrism, and prejudice.[31] I have described "Proverbs in Nazi Germany: the promulgation of anti-semitism and stereotypes through folklore', *Journal of American Folklore*, 95 (1982), 435–464 and J O J Nwachukwu-Agbada has studied the historical and social background of proverbs against the white colonisers in '"Bèkeè"[the white man] in Igbo Proverbial Lore', *Proverbium*, 5 (1988), 137–144. The sad story of just one such hateful proverb I have shown in my analysis of '"The only

good Indian is a dead Indian": history and meaning of a proverbial stereotype', *Journal of American Folklore*, 106 (1993), 38–60. Many additional studies need to be undertaken to show the danger and harm that such proverbial invectives can inflict on innocent people.

Strangely enough, social historians have not shown much interest in proverbs, but this appears to be changing as more and more historians are looking at how proverbs reflect the attitudes or worldview (mentality) of various social classes at different periods. George Boas, for example, examined the Latin proverb 'Vox populi, vox Dei' and its vernacular European translations in his book *Vox populi: essays in the history of an idea* (Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1969). Also there are major articles by Donald McKelvie, 'Proverbial elements in the oral tradition of an English urban industrial region', *Journal of the Folklore Institute*, 2 (1965), 244–261; Natalie Z Davis, 'Proverbial wisdom and popular error," in N Z Davis, *Society and culture in early modern France* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1975), pages 227–267 and 336–346 (notes); and J O J Nwachukwu-Agbada, 'Origin, meaning and value of Igbo historical proverbs', *Proverbium*, 7 (1990), 185–206. The latter is a significant article on the origin and importance of Igbo historical proverbs to an understanding of the cultural history of Nigeria. Although the texts might not be precise history, they contain important information concerning the folk interpretation of colonialism, wars, and other events. The fact that these matters were crystallised into proverbial form brought about the remembrance and memorability of such historical facts in a primarily oral culture. Also of major interest is also James Obelkevich's essay on 'Proverbs and social history', in Peter Burke and Roy Porter (eds), *The social history of language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pages 43–72, in which he discusses the users and uses of proverbs in Europe during different historical periods. He deals with various meanings of proverbs in their historical and social context, emphasising their significance as expressions of 'mentalities' or worldview. The article is primarily a social history of proverb usage in England and shows that historians ought to join literary scholars, folklorists, and anthropologists in studying proverbs as socially relevant wisdom. We definitely need more studies along these lines by cultural historians from various countries[32] to give us a picture of how proverbs and their use mirror the mores and worldview of their times.

Philologists, folklorists and cultural historians have occupied themselves for a long time with tracing the origin, history, dissemination, and meaning of individual proverbs and their variants. One could go so far as to say that there is a 'story' behind every proverb, and it is usually a sizeable task to deal with just one text in this diachronic and semantic fashion. About some proverbs, entire books have been written, as for example Matti Kuusi's seminal 420-page study *Sonne bei Regenschein. Zur Weltgeschichte einer Redensart* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1957) in which he investigates the origin, history and geographical distribution of the internationally known proverb 'When it rains and the sun shines the devil is beating his grandmother' and its many variants. The German folklorist and paremiologist Lutz Röhrich has put together a three-volume *Das große Lexikon der sprichwörtlichen Redensarten* (Freiburg: Herder, 1991–1992), in which he discusses the history and meaning of hundreds of German texts, and I have put together a special *International Bibliography of Explanatory Essays on Individual Proverbs and Proverbial Expressions* (Bern: Lang, 1977). While we have exemplary studies of quite a few individual proverbs, much remains to be done for obscure regional and dialectical texts as well as for globally disseminated proverbs. Historical studies of this type will also show that most proverbs have a monogenetic origin, but for some very basic proverbs, polygenesis might well be possible. Why should the classical proverb 'Big fish eat little fish', with its occurrence in all European languages, not have originated separately in Asian or African countries?[33] Much comparative work is still needed here, but our newest international proverb collections are showing that some proverbs appear to exist in languages so different from each other that no process of cultural borrowing in the form of loan translations might have taken place, which leaves us with the possibility of polygenetic origins for some proverbs.

In this regard, proverbs derived from the sacred writings of the world's religions have also gained wide circulation and have been studied as international expressions of wisdom. Selwyn Gurney Champion has put together a comparative proverb collection entitled *The eleven religions and their proverbial lore* (New York: Dutton, 1945), but there are many more, as for example Carl Schulze, *Die Biblischen Sprichwörter der deutschen Sprache* (Göttingen; Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1860; reprint edited by Wolfgang Mieder. Bern: Lang, 1987), which lists those biblical proverbs that

have gained common currency in the German language, and my small book *Not by bread alone: proverbs of the Bible* (Shelburne, Vermont: New England Press, 1990) with its 425 biblical proverbs current in the Anglo-American language. A vast international scholarship centres on wisdom literature which has found its way into traditional proverbs. Of particular importance are the studies by Clifford Henry Plopper, *Chinese religion seen through the proverb* (Shanghai: China Press; 1926; reprinted New York: Paragon, 1969); John Mark Thompson, *The form and function of proverbs in ancient Israel* (The Hague: Mouton, 1974); Carole R Fontaine, *Traditional sayings in the Old Testament: a contextual study* (Sheffield, United Kingdom: Almond Press, 1988); Ronald A Piper, *Wisdom in the Q-Tradition: the aphoristic teaching of Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Alan P Winton, *The proverbs of Jesus: issues of history and rhetoric* (Sheffield, United Kingdom: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990); and Theodore A Perry, *Wisdom literature and the structure of proverbs* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993) as well as T A Perry, *'The moral proverbs' [Proverbios morales] of Santob de Carrión. Jewish wisdom in Christian Spain* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987). But much more comparative work is needed to point out the similarities and dissimilarities of the proverbial wisdom of the various religions.[34] We also don't know enough yet about the influence that biblical proverbs had on the African or Asian population due to missionary work. An exemplary and massive study (767 pages) along these lines is Philippe Dinzolele Nzambi, *Proverbes bibliques et proverbes kongo. Etude comparative de 'Proverbia 25–29' et de quelques proverbes kongo* (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 1992). But such indigenous studies as Gerald J Wanjohi's 'The Gikuyu philosophy of religion with reference to the proverbs', *Journal of African Religion and Philosophy*, 2 (1993), 165–172, and Ambrose Monye, 'The paucity of God-based proverbs in Aniocha [Nigeria]', *Proverbium*, 6 (1989), 55–65, are also of great value in understanding the religious and ethical value system of various peoples.[35]

Religious proverbs are, of course, also used as a teaching tool, and so are proverbs in general. Entire books have been written on the pedagogical and didactic value of this traditional wisdom, notably Werner R Herzenstiel, *Erziehungserfahrung im deutschen Sprichwort. Theorie einer*

freiheitlichen Erziehungspraxis (Saarbrücken: Universitäts- und Schulbuchverlag, 1973) and Michal Wulff, *Das Sprichwort im Kontext der Erziehungstradition. Dargestellt am Beispiel deutsch-jüdischer Sprichwörter* (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 1990). There is also Dumitru Stanciu's article 'The proverb and the problems of education', *Proverbium*, 3 (1986), 153–178, in which he shows that many Rumanian (and other) proverbs deal with such matters as the mind, wisdom, experience, learning, authority, and the teacher. Proverbs contain much educational wisdom, and they have long been used as didactic tools in child rearing, linguistic and religious instruction in schools, and teaching about general human experiences. Such proverbs continue to play a major role as a pedagogical tool in modern societies, especially among family members and at school. They deserve to be taught as part of general education, and since they belong to the common knowledge of basically all native speakers, they are indeed very effective devices to communicate wisdom and knowledge about human nature and the world around us. Felix Boateng reaches similar conclusions in his significant paper on 'African traditional education: a tool for intergenerational communication', in Molefi Kete Asante and Kariamu Welsh Asante (eds), *African Culture: The rhythms of unity* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood, 1985), pages 109–122. The author argues that Western formal education in Africa did not consider traditional cultural transmission a goal of the educative process for Africans. He calls for a return to traditional education in Africa, including in particular the rich heritage of oral literature as expressed in fables, myths, legends, folk tales, and proverbs. The educational and communicative power of proverbs in African societies lies in their use as validators of traditional ethics, procedures, and beliefs in teaching children as well as adults. Dennis W Folly has reached similar conclusions regarding the didactic function of proverbs in African-American families in *The poetry of African-American proverb usage: a speech act analysis* (Dissertation, University of California at Los Angeles, 1991). Further studies will certainly show that the value and power of proverbs as educational tools have not diminished in traditional or technological societies.

The interrelationship of proverbs with other verbal folklore genres just mentioned has also been of great interest to paremiologists for a long time. Classical Greek and Latin writers commented on the obvious interrelationship between fables and proverbs, theorising, as it were, about which of the

genres came first. In other words, does the proverb that adds a bit of moralising or ethical wisdom at the end of a fable summarise its content, or is the fable nothing but an explanatory comment on the original proverb? This scholarship has been splendidly edited by Pack Carnes in his volume entitled *Proverbia in Fabula: essays on the relationship of the fable and the proverb* (Bern: Lang, 1988). The use and function of proverbs in fairy tales has been studied by Heinz Rölleke (ed), *'Redensarten des Volks, auf die ich immmer horche'. Das Sprichwort in den 'Kinder- und Hausmärchen' der Brüder Grimm* (Bern: Lang, 1988),[36] and Galit Hasan-Rokem has investigated *Proverbs in Israeli folk narratives: a strucutral semantic analysis* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeaketemia, 1982). Yet all of this does not mean that we do not still need more studies on the interrelationship of proverbs with riddles, jokes, folk narratives, songs, etc.

The same is true for the use and function of proverbs in literature. Early scholarship consists primarily of annotated lists of the proverbs found in literary works, while more recent publications address the problems of identification and interpretation of proverbial language in poetry, dramas, and prose. In *Proverbs in literature: an international bibliography* (Bern: Lang, 1978), I have shown that there are hundreds of literary proverb studies centring primarily on European and American authors ranging from the Middle Ages through the nineteenth century. The same has been noted by Roger D Abrahams and Barbara A Babcock in their essay on 'The literary use of proverbs," *Journal of American Folklore*, 90 (1977), 414--429.[37] While the many monographs on famous writers such as J. Alan Pfeffer's *The proverb in Goethe* (New York: King's Crown Press, 1948); María Cecilia Colombi's *Los refranes en el Quijote: texto y contexto* (Potomac, Maryland: Scripta Humanistica, 1989); and Marjorie Donker's *Shakespeare's proverbial themes: a rhetorical context for the 'sententia' as 'res'* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood, 1992) are definitely of great importance, the time has surely come to investigate lesser-known authors from other parts of the world, particularly authors of the modern age. George B Bryan has done this in an exemplary fashion in his book *Black sheep, red herrings, and blue murder: the proverbial Agatha Christie* (Bern: Lang, 1993). Together we have assembled *The proverbial Winston S. Churchill: an index to proverbs in the works of Sir Winston Churchill* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood, 1995), which indicates that paremiologists should go beyond purely literary

authors in their investigations of written sources. We also have many studies on the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe, for which Adeleke Adeeko's *Words' horse, or The proverb as a paradigm of literary understanding* (Dissertation, University of Florida, 1991) must suffice here as a representative example.[38] But rather than writing yet another study on Achebe or Shakespeare, it would perhaps be even more beneficial to consider authors hitherto uninvestigated for their effective literary use of proverbs, as for example Zora Neale Hurston, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and Yukio Mishima. While we have Wolfram Eberhard's study of 'Proverbs in selected Chinese novels', *Proverbium*, 2 (1985), 21–57, we need many more investigations of that type in order to draw valid conclusions about the use and function of proverbs during the different literary periods of various cultures and languages. It is important that studies dealing with individual authors should also be placed into a comparative framework in due time, as I have done some years ago for the use of proverbs in nineteenth-century German literature in *Das Sprichwort in der deutschen Prosaliteratur des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts* (München: Fink, 1976). The many specific analyses of literary works ought to add up to a better understanding of the poetics of proverbs in literature, also giving us, of course, answers to what proverbs were in frequent use at what time.

Quite a similar picture presents itself when one looks at the long tradition of iconographic interpretations of proverbs, ranging from medieval wood cuts to misericords, from book illustrations to emblems, from tapestries to oil paintings, and from broadsheets to modern caricatures, cartoons, comic strips, and advertisements. Much attention has been paid to the Dutch painter Pieter Bruegel (1520?–1569), who produced many proverb pictures, his most celebrated being the *Netherlandish proverbs* (1559), an oil painting illustrating over one hundred proverbial expressions. Numerous books and articles have been written on this picture alone, two recent publications being Alan Dundes and Claudia A Stibbe, *The art of mixing metaphors: a folkloristic interpretation of the 'Netherlandish Proverbs' by Pieter Bruegel the Elder* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1981) and Margaret A. Sullivan 'Bruegel's proverb painting: renaissance art for a humanist audience', *The Art Bulletin*, 73 (1991), 431–466. As valuable as this preoccupation with Bruegel is, let us also pay more attention to the proverb pictures of other painters and eventually establish a complete history of proverb

iconography. And let us not forget other artistic media, including proverb depictions on ceramics, textiles, staffs of authority, gold weights, Koshin stones (the three wise monkeys), coins, stamps, playing cards, etc.[39] This is still very much an untilled field, and many new insights lie in store for us in this fascinating area of proverbial art.

Without having exhausted all the many possible areas of proverb inquiry, I wish to say a few final words about proverbs in the modern age. While it is perfectly appropriate for paremiologists to look backwards for the use of proverbs, we must not forget to investigate their traditional and innovative use in our own time. With the growing interest in popular culture, the mass media, and cultural literacy, paremiologists ought to look at which traditional proverbs survive today and which have actually been coined in the twentieth century. For some studies of individual current proverbs, see Nigel Rees, *Sayings of the century: the stories behind the twentieth century's quotable sayings* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1984). I have dealt with the modern German scene in *Deutsche Sprichwörter in Literatur, Politik, Presse und Werbung* (Hamburg: Buske, 1983) and with Anglo-American materials in my book entitled *Proverbs are never out of season* (1993) mentioned above. People do not necessarily consider proverbs to be sacrosanct, and the 'fun' of parodying, manipulating, and perverting them has become quite widespread. While such parodies might be quite humorous, they also often express serious socio-political satire in the form of slogans and graffiti, as Jess Nierenberg has convincingly shown in 'Proverbs in graffiti: taunting traditional wisdom', *Maledicta*, 7 (1983), 41–58. Much work has already been accomplished on the manipulative use of proverbs in advertising and the mass media as well as their (mis)use in political discourse.[40] Proverbs, as well as intentionally rephrased anti-proverbs in all types of modern communication, enable and empower paremiologists to study them literally everywhere at any time.

Modern paremiology is an absolutely open-ended phenomenon with many new challenges lying ahead. There is no doubt that proverbs, those old gems of generationally tested wisdom, help us in our everyday life and communication to cope with the complexities of the modern human condition. Traditional proverbs and their value system give us some basic structure, and if their worldview does not fit a particular situation, they are

quickly changed into revealing and liberating anti-proverbs. And there are, of course, the new proverbs of our time, such as 'Different strokes for different folks', that express a liberated worldview. Proverbs don't always have to be didactic and prescriptive; they can also be full of satire, irony, and humor. As such, the thousands of proverbs that make up the stock of proverbial wisdom of all cultures represent not a universally valid but certainly a pragmatically useful treasure. In retrospect, paremiologists have amassed a truly impressive body of proverb scholarship on which prospective paremiology can build in good faith. Modern theoretical and empirical paremiology will doubtlessly lead to new insights about human behaviour and communication, and by comparing these research results on an international basis, paremiologists might add their bit to a humane and enlightened world order based on experienced wisdom.

Notes

1 See the information review article by Katsuaki Takeda, ' Proverb studies in Japan', Proverbium, 12 (1995), 323-341.

2 This essay collection has also appeared in a French translation as Grigorii L'vovich Permiakov (ed), *Tel grain tel pain. Poétique de la sagesse populaire*, translated by Victor Rosenzweig and Annette Taraillon (Mosciu: Edition du Progrès, 1988).

3 It should be noted that numerous essay volumes that deal with phraseology in a broad sense and confront paremiological questions only in individual articles have appeared in recent years. These volumes are usually based on phraseological conferences in Europe and referred to generically as 'Europhras'. Here are a few representative titles with definite value for paremiologists: Gertrud Gréciano (ed), *Europhras 88: Phraséologie contrastive* (Strassbourg: Université des Sciences Humaines, 1989); Christine Palm (ed), *Europhras 90: Akten der internationalen Tagung zur germanistischen Phraseologieforschung* (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 1991); and Barbara Sandig (ed), *Europhras 92: Tendenzen der Phraseologieforschung* (Bochum: Brockmeyer, 1994). See also Harald Burger and Robert Zett (eds), *Aktuelle probleme der phraseologie* (Bern: Lang, 1987); Jarmo Korhonen (ed), *Beiträge zur allgemeinen und germanistischen Phraseologieforschung* (Oulu: Oulun Yliopisto, 1987); and J. Korhonen (ed), *Untersuchungen zur Phraseologie des Deutschen und anderer Sprachen* (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 1992).

4 Many studies have dealt with misogynous proverbs, as for example the recent

comments by Sheila K Webster, 'Women, sex, and marriage in Moroccan proverbs', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 14 (1982), 173–184; Charlotte Kahn, 'Proverbs of love and marriage: a psychological perspective', *Psychoanalytic Review*, 70 (1983), 359–371; J O J Nwachakwu-Agbada, 'The Old Woman in Igbo Proverbial Lore', *Proverbium*, 6 (1989), 75–89; and Wan-Hsuan Yao-Weyrauch, *Die Rolle der Frau im deutschen und chinesischen Sprichwort* (Bochum: Brockmeyer, 1990).

5 The following remarks on paremiography are based on my earlier essay "Pro legomena to prospective paremiography', *Proverbium*, 7 (1990), 133–144. Regarding the history and future of German paremiography, see my 'Geschichte und Probleme der neuhochdeutschen Sprichwörterlexikographie', in Herbert Ernst Wiegand (ed), *Studien zur neuhochdeutschen Lexikographie* (Hildesheim: Olms, 1984), vol 5, pp. 307–358.

6 See also Samuel Singer's significant work Sprich*wörter* des Mittelalters, 3 vols. (Bern: Lang, 1944–1947). For an excellent comparative collection of proverbs of the Germanic and Roma'nce languages, see Ida von Düringsfeld and Otto von Reinsberg-Düringsfeld, *Sprichwörter der germanischen und romanischen Sprachen*, 2 vols (Leipzig: Fries, 1872–1875; rpt Hildesheim: Olms, 1973).

7 Archer Taylor and Bartlett Jere Whiting published A dictionary of American proverbs and proverbial phrases, 1820–1880 (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1958), and B J Whiting followed suit with his *Early American proverbs and proverbial phrases* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1977) and *Modern Proverbs and Proverbial Sayings* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989). There are also the historical dictionaries by F P Wilson, *The Oxford dictionary of English proverbs*, 3rd ed (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970) and John A Simpson, *The concise Oxford dictionary of proverbs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), creating a superb basis for the historical study of English language proverbs. Teodor Flonta in Tasmania at present is working on the first dictionary of English proverbs current in Australia.

8 See Ingrid Sarv and Arvo Krikmann, ' Eesti vanasonade teaduslik väljaanne käsikirjas valminud', *Keel ja Kirjandus*, 19 (1976), 541–547, where the two authors discuss the history of this project and analyse various classification schemes and their problems.

9 See also the useful collections by Selwyn Gurney Champion, *Racial proverbs. A selection of the world's proverbs arranged linguistically* (London: Routledge, 1938); Jerzy Gluski, *Proverbs: a comparative book of English, French, German, Italian, Spanish and Russian proverbs with a Latin appendix* (New York: Elsevier, 1971); and Wolfgang Mieder, *Encyclopedia of world proverbs* (Englewood Cliffs,

New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1986).

10 For some standard collections in European languages see Arthur H Smith, *Proverbs and common sayings from the Chinese* (Shanghai: American Presbyterian Mission Press, 1914; rpt New York: Paragon and Dover, 1965); P Ehmann, *Die Sprichwörter und bildlichen Ausdrücke der japanischen Sprache*, 2nd ed (Tokyo: Verlag der Asia Major, 1927); Henry H Hart, *Seven hundred Chinese proverbs* (Palo Alto, California: Stanford University Press, 1937); Aisaburo Akiyama, *Japanese proverbs and proverbial phrases*, 3rd ed (Yokohama: Yoshikawa, 1940); Daniel Crump Buchanan, *Japanese proverbs and sayings* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1965); C C Sun, *As the saying goes: an annotated anthology of Chinese and equivalent English sayings and expressions* (St. Lucia, Australia: University of Queensland Press, 1981); Konrad Herrmann, *Reiskörner fallen nicht vom Himmel: Chinesische Sprich wörter* (Leipzig: Kiepenheuer, 1984); and David Galef, *'Even monkeys fall from trees' and other Japanese proverbs* (Tokyo: Tuttle, 1987).

11 See Matti Kuusi, Towards an internatinla type-system of proverbs (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1972; also published in *Proverbium*, 19 [1972], 699–736); and Grigorii L'vovich Permiakov, *Ot pogovorki do skazki: Zametki po obshchei teorii klishe* (Moskva: Nauka, 1970). This significant study was also published in English translation by Y N Filippov with the title *From proverb to folk-tale: notes on the general theory of cliché* (Moscow: Nauka, 1979).

12 Grigorii L'vovich Permiakov, Paremiologicheskie eksperiment. Materialy dlia paremiologicheskogo minimuma (Moskva: Nauka, 1971). See also his 'O paremiologicheskom urovne iazyka i russkom paremiologicheskom minimume' and 'Iz stat'i `K voprosu o russkom paremiologicheskom minimume' which are both included in G L Permiakov (ed), *Paremiologicheskie issledovaniia* (Moskva: Nauka, 1984), pp 262–263 and pp 265–268. See also Peter Grzybek, 'How to do things with some proverbs: Zur Frage eines parömischen Mini mums', in P Grzybek and Wolfgang Eismann (eds), *Semiotische Studien zum Sprichwort. simple forms reconsidered I* (Tübingen: Narr, 1984), pp 351–358. Also of much interest is Ingrid Schellbach-Kopra, 'Parömisches Minimum und Phraseodidaktik im finnisch-deutschen Bereich', in Jarmo Korhonen (ed), *Beiträge zur allgemeinen und germanistischen Phraseologieforschung* (Oulu: Oulun Yliopisto, 1987), pp 245–255.

13 See Wolfgang Mieder, 'Sprichwörliche Schwundstuffen des Märchens', *Proverbium*, 3 (1986), 257–271; and W. Mieder, 'Fairy-tale allusions in modern German aphorisms', in Donald Haase (ed), *The reception of Grimms' fairy tales: responses, reactions, revisions* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1993), pp 149–166.

14 See Peter Grzybek, ' Sinkendes Kulturgut? Eine empirische Pilotstudie zur Bekanntheit deutscher Sprichwörter', *Wirkendes Wort*, 41 (1991), 239–264; Wolfgang Mieder, 'Paremiological minimum and cultural literacy', in Simon J Bronner (ed), *Creativity and tradition in folklore: new directions* (Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 1992), pp 185–203; Peter Grzybek, Danica Škara, and Zdenka Heyken, 'Der Weisheit der Gsse auf der Spur: Eine empirische Pilotstudie zur Bekanntheit kroatischer Sprichwörter', *Zeitschrift für Balkanologie*, 29 (1993), 85–98; and Peter Grzybek, Christoph Chlosta, and Undine Roos, 'Ein Vorschlag zur Klassifikation von Sprichwörtern bei der empirischen Sprichwortforschung', in Barbara Sandig (ed), *Europhras 92: Tendenzen der Phraseologieforschung* (Bochum: Brockmeyer, 1994), pp 221–256.

15 Regarding such demoscopic research, see Isidor Levin, 'Überlegungen zur demoskopischen Parömiologie', *Proverbium*, 11 (1968), 289–293 and 13 (1969), 361–366; Wolfgang Mieder, 'Neues zur demoskopischen Sprichwörterforschung', *Proverbium*, 2 (1985), 307-328; and Peter Grzybek and Christoph Chlosta, "Grundlagen der empirischen Sprichwortforschung', *Proverbium*, 10 (1993), 89–128.

16 See Chrisoph Chlosta, Peter Grzybek, and Undine Roos, 'Wer kennt denn heute noch den Simrock? Ergebnisse einer empirischen Untersuchung zur Bekanntheit deutscher Sprichwörter in traditionellen Sammlungen," in Ch Chlosta, P. Grzybek, and Elisabeth Piirainen (eds), *Sprachbilder zwischen Theorie und Praxis* (Bochum: Brockmeyer, 1994), pp 31–60. Concerning the relationship of l iteracy and orality in paremiographical research, see Wolfgang Mieder, 'Moderne Sprichwörterforschung zwischen Mündlichkeit und Schriftlichkeit', in Lutz Röhrich and Erika Lindig (eds), *Volksdichtung zwischen Mündlichkeit und Schriftlichkeit* (Tübingen: Narr, 1989), pp 187–208.

17 See Archer Taylor, 'How nearly complete are the collections of proverbs?', Proverbium, 14 (1969), 369–371.

18 Space does not permit a discussion of these formulaic genres, but the reader is referred to my three volumes of *International proverb scholarship: an annotated bibliography* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1982, 1990 and 1993) and my updated annual bibliographies in *Proverbium* (1984ff) for numerous references. The references to specific publications in this section are highly selective and fragmentary at best and attempt only to present some of the standard works for at least some languages.

19 See Klaus Dieter Pilz, ' Wer ist der Bergründer der wissenshaftlichen Sprichwortforschung? Versuch einer Richtigstellung," *Muttersprache*, 89 (1979), 201–207. For nineteenth century German paremiology, see also my *Deutsche*

Sprichwörterforschung des 19 Jahrhunderts (Bern: Lang, 1984) with major essays of that period.

20 For a collection of Matti Kuusi's significant folkloric and paremiological essays in English, see M. Kuusi, *Mind and form in folkore: selected essays*, ed by Henni Ilomäki (Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 1994).

21 See also Louis Combet, Recherches sur le 'refranero' castillan (Paris: Société d'édition 'Les Belles Lettres', 1971); Jacques Pineaux, *Proverbes et dictons français*, 6th ed (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1973); Gerhard Peukes, *Untersuchungen zum Sprichwort im Deutschen* (Berlin: Schmidt, 1977); Jean-Marie Ndzomo Malla, *Proverbes: vrais ou faux? Crise et dangers du proverbe africain* (Bandundu, Zaïre: Ceeba, 1982); Maria Conca, *Paremiologia* (Valencia: Universitat de Valencia, 1987); Regine Lassen, *Das katalanische Sprichwort. Literarische Tradition und umgangssprachlicher Gebrauch* (Tübingen: Narr, 1988); and Agnes Szemerkényi, *'Közmondás nem hazug szólás': A proverbiumok használatának lehetöségei* (Budapest: Akadémiai kiadó, 1994).

22 There are of course many specialised studies on the subjects, a few recent monographs being Helmut Seidl, *Medizinische Sprichwörter im Englischen und Deutschen. Eine diachrone Untersuchung zur vergleichenden Parömiologie* (Bern: Lang, 1982); Brigitte Janz, *Rechtssprichwörter im 'Sachsenspiegel'* (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 1989); and George D Freier, *Weather Proverbs* (Tucson, Arizona: Fisher, 1992).

23 For the fascinating genre of wellerisms, see Ceroni, *The Italian wellerism to the end of the Seventeenth Century* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1953); Winfried Hofmann, *Das rheinische Sagwort. Ein Beitrag zur Sprichwörterkunde* (Siegburg: Schmitt, 1959); and Wolfgang Mieder and Stewart A Kingsbury, *A dictionary of wellerisms* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

24 For two exempary studies, see Mathilde Hain, Sprichwort und Volkssprache. Eine volkskundlich-soziologische Dorfuntersuchung (Gießen: Schmitz, 1951); and Else Hünert-Hofmann, *Phraseologismen in Dialekt und Umgangssprache* (Marburg: Elwert, 1991).

25 See also the posthumous collection of various essays on structural, semantic, and semiotic aspects by Grigorii L'vovich Permiakov, *Osnovy strukturnoi pare miologii*, ed. by G L Kapchits (Moskva: Nauka, 1988).

26 See also Werner Koller, Redensarten: Linguistische aspekte, Vorkommensanalysen, Sprachspiel (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1977); Klaus Dieter Pilz, *Phraseologie: Versuch einer interdisziplinären Abgrenzung,*

Begriffsbestimmung und Systematisierung unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der deutschen Gegenwartssprache 2 vols (Göppingen: Kümmerle, 1978); Harald Burger, Annelies Buhofer, and Ambros Sialm, *Handbuch der Phraseologie* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1982); Wolfgang Fleischer, *Phraseologie der deutschen Gegenwartssprache* (Leipzig: VEB Bibliographisches Institut, 1982); Gertrud Gréciano, *Signification et dénotation en allemand: La sémantique des expressions idiomatiques* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1983; and Terence Odlin, 'Language universals and constraints on proverbial form', *Proverbium*, 3 (1986), 125–151.

27 See Adrian Furnham, 'The proverbial truth: contextually reconciling and the truthfulness of Antonymous Proverbs', *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 6 (1987), 49–55.

28 See Donald R Gormham. 'A proverbs test for clinical experimental use', *Psychological Reports*, 2 (1956), 1–12.

29 See also Tim B Rogers, 'Proverbs as psychological theories', *Canadian Psychology/Psychologie Canadienne*, 31 (1990), 195–207. Yet another excellent review article is by Richard P. Honeck, Katherine Voegtle, Mark A Dorfmueller, and Robert R Hoffman, 'Proverbs, Meaning, and Group Structure', in R P Honeck and R R Hoffman (eds), *Cognition and figurative language* (Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1980), pp 127–161.

30 See Judith R Pasamanick, 'Talk "does" cook rice: Proverb Abstraction through Social Interaction', *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 44 (1983), 5–25; and Tim B Rogers, 'The use of slogans, colloquialisms, and proverbs in the treatment of substance addiction: a psychological application of proverbs', *Proverbium*, 6 (1989), 103–112.

31 See also F N Robinson, ' Irish national character', *Modern Philology*, 43 (1945), 1–10; Alan Dundes, *Life is like a chicken coop ladder: a portrait of German culture through folklore* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984); and William Nicolaisen, 'The Proverbial Scot', *Proverbium*, 11 (1994), 197–206.

32 See, for example, also D B Shimkin and Pedro Sanjuan, 'Culture and world view: a method of [Proverb] analysis applied to rural Russia', *American Anthropologist*, 55 (1953), 329–348; Edmund I Gordon, *Sumerian proverbs. Glimpses of everyday life in Ancient Mesopotamia* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1959); and my *Sprichwort – Wahrwort!? Studien zur Geschichte, Bedeutung und Funktion deutscher Sprichwörter* (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 1992).

33 See my two studies' History and interpretation of a proverb about human nature: "big fish eat little fish", in my *Tradition and Innovation in Folk Litera-*

ture (Hanover, New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 1987), pp 178–228 and pp 259–268 (notes); and '"Die großen Fische fressen die kleinen": Geschichte und Bedeutung eines Sprichwortes über die menschliche Natur', in my *Deutsche Redensarten, Sprichwörter und Zitate: Studien zu ihrer Herkunft, überlieferung und Verwendung* (Wien: Edition Praesens, 1995), pp 89–125.

34 See Galit Hasan-Rokem, ' And GOd created the proverb ... inter-generic and inter-textual aspects of biblical paremiology – or the longest way to the shortest text', in Susan Niditsch (ed), *Text and tradition: the Hebrew bible and folklore* (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1990), pp 107–120.

35 See also Gerald J Wanjohi, ' THe philosophy of Gikuyu proverbs and other sayings with particular reference to ethics', in George F McLean and John Kromkowski (eds), *Relations between cultures* (Washington, D C: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 1991), pp 53–59; and Alyce M McKenzie, 'The preacher as subversive sage: preaching on biblical proverbs', *Proverbium*, 12 (1995), 169–193.

36 See also my article on ' Wilhelm Grimm's proverbial additions in the fairy tales', *Proverbium*, 3 (1986), 59–83.

37 See also my comments on 'The essence of literary proverb studies', *Proverbium*, no. 23 (1974), 888–894.

38 For proverb studies regarding African literature, see my *African proverb scholarship: an annotated bibliography* (Colorado Springs, Colorado: African Proverbs Project, 1994).

39 For a few studies, see R Sutherland Rattray, Ashanti goldsmiths and gold weights', in R S Rattray, *Ashanti* (New York: Clarendon Press, 1923; rpt New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969), pp 300–321; "Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 'A playful note: the good old game of proverbs', *Proverbium*, 22 (1973), 860–861; Doran H Ross, 'The verbal art of Akan linguist staffs', *African Arts*, 16 (1982), 56–67; M D McLeod, 'Asante gold-weights: images and words', *Word and Image*, 3 (1987), 289–295; Wolfgang Mieder, 'The proverbial three wise monkeys: "Hear No Evil, See No Evil, Speak No Evil"', in W Mieder, *Tradition and innovation in folk literature* (Hanover, New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 1987), pp 157–177 and pp 255–259 (notes); Noël Riley, 'Benjamin Franklin's Maxims', in N Riley, *The history of children's China. Part I: 1790-1890* (Ilminster, England: Dennis, 1991), pp 270–283; Peter Adler and Nicholas Barnard, *Asafo! African flags of the Fante* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1992); Susan Domowitz, 'Wearing Proverbs: Anyi Names for printed factory cloth', *African Arts*, 25 (1992), 82–87 and 104 (notes).

40 See Barbara and Wolfgang Mieder, ' Tradition and innovation: proverbs in advertising', *Journal of Popular Culture*, 11 (1977), 308-319; Joseph Raymond, 'Tensions in proverbs: more light on international understanding', *Western Folklore*, 15 (1956), 153–158; and my 'Proverbs in Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*', *Proverbium*, 11 (1994), 159–174.

African proverbs and African philosophy

A T Dalfovo

Introduction

The interest of philosophy in proverbs derives from the interest of philosophy in culture. The meaning of culture here is the one inspired by the social sciences and that has contributed a new understanding of philosophy as well, particularly in Africa. It is necessary to bear in mind this significance of culture and its relationship to philosophy in order to realise the reasons for the interest of philosophy in proverbs. The first part of this paper will deal broadly with culture and philosophy, while the second part will deal more specifically with the interest of proverbs for philosophy. With reference to the title of the paper, the adjective 'African' applied to proverbs intends to recall my experience with Lugbara proverbs and culture and to place the forthcoming pages in this context.[1] The meaning of 'African' as linked to philosophy will emerge, I hope, in the course of this analysis.

Culture and philosophy

The term culture derives from the Latin *cultura* (cultivation). It originally described the act of bestowing labour upon the land. From that meaning, a metaphorical one was derived and applied to the improvement and refinement of the person by education. According to that significance, culture was eminently centred on the person, namely transmitted from person to person and basically managed by single individuals. Within that personal dimension, culture was theoretical, dealing mainly with knowledge directed to the intellect. The personal and theoretical aspects of culture fostered a monistic vision of reality. People perceived the pluralism of life, but deep down they were convinced that such variety was accidental and a substantial unity existed beyond it.

Those personal, theoretical and monistic aspects began to change when a new development in the understanding of culture emerged in the 1870s, gradually asserting itself as the prevailing meaning.[2] The most distinctive

aspect in that new understanding was the shift from a personal to a social vision of culture. Culture belonged to society rather than to individuals. They were shaped by culture rather than shaping it. Persons acquired their specific personality in culture. Culture was anthropogenic. The emphasis on the social dimension brought about the awareness of other cultures, sensitising people to cultural pluralism.

The roots of culture go deeper than education and socialisation. The origin of culture is related to the specific manner in which humans relate to their environment. Their relationship is not instinctive and direct, as in other animals. Humans have the capacity, and the need, to transcend the immediate experience and automatic acceptance of their environment. They consider and interpret it, creating ideas, explanations, values, beliefs, interpretations of it that amount to a reorganisation of their environment. Humans mediate their contact with the world through this new reality which is actually the one in which they live and through which they relate to their environment. They cannot extricate themselves from this dimension of existence which they themselves have created. Hence, human beings do not live face to face with objective reality. They can only approach it through the set of elements they have placed between reality and themselves. They have created for themselves a universe made up of language, myth, art, and religion that constitutes a network through which the perception of all reality needs to pass. This universe is culture.[3]

As already indicated, culture is made up of a variety of elements, like values, beliefs and ideas. These may be described as the mental, spiritual or inner dimensions of culture. There is also a material or outer aspect of culture made up of artifacts, structures, behaviour, etc. The mental dimension of culture provides the motivation or soul for its material expression. Both aspects are essential. The variety of cultural elements is perceived by human beings, more or less clearly, as a unitary phenomenon. Its identification and abstraction are given the name 'culture'. This linguistic specification may not always be present but there is a perception, though rather vague in most people, concerning the cultural elements to which one's thought and behaviour are referred, from which one's history and destiny draw meaning, and from which one's social life is made possible and human existence acquires a sense of purpose. Although culture is produced

by human beings, they do not do so as single individuals but as part of society. They contribute to their culture but, at the same time, they are born into it and, to a great extent, are shaped by it. People are born into the interpretation of reality and the products of the creativity of their tradition and society.

For philosophy, this new understanding of culture has not simply meant taking note of an important development in the field of meaning facilitated by the social sciences. The new concept of culture has expanded beyond the disciplinary limits and language of the social sciences, providing a general understanding within which to place human existence. Philosophy has become aware that culture is not a separate object on which to ponder but is the very matrix within which philosophy itself exists. This implies that one does not philosophise outside culture and about culture but within culture and upon culture. As culture is the universe of humanity, human philosophy is the philosophy of culture. This explains how the 'philosophy of culture' has become an essential branch in contemporary philosophy. For philosophy, particularly in Africa, this new vision has meant revising some concepts related to the understanding of philosophy that were derived from Western culture and were spread by colonialism. The Greek roots of Western philosophy and its historical development in Europe were reappraised within their cultural and historical perspective. At the same time, philosophy in Africa faced the challenge to identify the elements that were proper to it. African philosophy searched for its identity, its meaning and soul, a search that moved in three directions.[4]

One of the research currents held that any philosophy, to be authentic, had to fit into the way in which rationality, critique and systematicity had been practised in Western tradition. Reason could not be severed from its ancient Greek roots.[5] The experience of the Greek philosophers was considered common to any person and people who wanted to philosophise. Within this view, the search for African philosophy scrutinised African history and experience for the philosophical elements that resembled those in Greek and Western history and experience. A practical outcome of this approach was that the philosophy syllabi in African educational institutions were left substantially unaltered, with the teaching of philosophy continuing along the lines of Western tradition. The examples to illustrate the teaching of

philosophy were drawn from the African context but the substance of the teaching came from Western philosophy. The specific characteristics of African philosophy appeared to fade vis-à-vis an emphasised universality of philosophy.

Another orientation was that of philosophers who searched with determination and confidence for what constituted the core and specificity of African philosophy. They realistically felt that the evolution of African philosophy required a strong stand vis-à-vis the pervasive influence of Western philosophy on African thought, life and education. They directed their search into African culture, trying to discern the endogenous from the exogenous elements in the philosophy currently practised. They tried to find and highlight the differences between African and Western philosophies in order to establish the foundations for their respective identities. These philosophers provided leadership and inspiration, but at the same time met considerable obstacles in the established system and prevailing current of thought, which considered some of their statements unphilosophical.

A third course emerged as an answer to the challenges posed by the other two approaches. It was felt that cultural pluralism prompting the search for African philosophy should lead to a better understanding of humanity, which implied appreciating both what was common to it and what was peculiar to its various cultures. Humanity had to be considered in its unifying traits as well as in the manner in which these common traits became explicit in different historical and social contexts. An encouragement along that line came from the fact that people, while claiming the right to be different, sought to agree on what was common among themselves. In the light of that trend to share a common belonging while appreciating peculiar differences, African and Western philosophies were recognised as having specific identities and also common elements. The philosophical search for what was specific to cultures and common to humanity has been gradually bearing fruit.

The role of philosophy within these cultural understanding and research approaches, particularly the second and third ones, is explained along the following lines. As already said, although people may not always be aware of the existence of culture in itself, they nevertheless refer to aspects of it in

order to nourish their identity, motivate their behaviour, keep their social cohesion, and overcome critical moments in their society, etc. Sometimes, such references have to be supported by reasons that develop into a clarifying discourse with arguments for and against certain stands or statements. This is already philosophy, the type called 'first-order philosophy' by some thinkers.[6] First-order philosophy is at work in providing explanations, interpretations, answers and solutions that forge culture, and then in developing reasons to motivate its existence. It is called first-order philosophy to distinguish it from 'second-order philosophy'. The latter ponders on first-order philosophy, explores its elements, questions its answers, and systematises its thinking into a structured whole. Second-order philosophy organizses its own experience in this endeavour, becoming a discipline in which people may be trained and within which philosophers in the professional sense may better exercise the task of second-order philosophy. The task of second-order philosophy is mainly to ponder over all that constitutes culture, to understand its deep reasons, its influence on humans and their contribution to it.

Second-order philosophy, born from first-order philosophy, could not exist without the material supplied by the latter, a supply it needs to constantly refer to in order to remain true to the cultural reality it philosophises upon. This constant reference to first-order philosophy prevents second-order philosophy from melting concrete cultural differences into a vague universal culture. It is true that a philosophical analysis of culture ultimately leads to the person who constitutes the core of culture and in whom cultures find unity in themselves and among themselves. Hence, this analysis tends to penetrate the essence of culture, bringing to light the common denominator in cultures or their universality beyond their differences. But this does not imply destroying the differences, because the 'universal' of second-order philosophy stands to the 'particular' of first-order philosophy as the abstract stands to the concrete. The particular and the concrete are the foundations of the universal and the abstract. In other words, second-order philosophy cannot possibly sever itself from first-order philosophy.

At the same time, first-order philosophy needs second-order philosophy, which is like saying that culture needs to be methodically and efficiently pondered upon. This is not only for the general motive suggested by

Socrates that 'the unexamined life is not worth living'. There is a more specific and pertinent reason found in the contemporary fact of 'popular culture' tending to become 'mass culture'.[7] Popular culture is the one contributed by all the people of a society in the course of their history and passed on in their tradition. It is a result of their natural interaction with the environment in which they live. Mass culture, on the other hand, is a relatively recent phenomenon. It originates from a few people who artificially produce the elements of a new culture, responding not to the common challenge of the natural environment but to the restricted interests of the economic and political sectors. This new culture is forced upon the masses through a skilful use of mass media and the manipulation of public opinion. The masses are relatively helpless vis-à-vis this industrial and ideological might that steers through their choices, imposes new values, and creates an artificial culture disrupting the existing one. A way to contain this onslaught is by giving a sound foundation or motivation to one's cultural identity and freedom of choice obtained by second-order philosophy pondering on popular culture and on its first-order philosophy.

African philosophy, born within African culture and operating at both its first- and second-order levels, has been establishing its identity through its activity. Proverbs have an important role to play in this exercise, as the next section of this paper is going to indicate.

Proverbs and philosophy

Proverbs may be described as sayings originating from experience, being expressed in a pithy, fixed and metaphorical language, and conveying a message.[8]

The origin of proverbs

The experiential origin of proverbs, as far as Lugbara culture is concerned, is extensively shown by their topics, ranging over the entire life of the people, dealing with their home and family, their work and social relations, their values and problems. Hence proverbs are rooted in the same reality that prompts human beings to forge their cultures. They are expressions of culture and thus they reflect reality because they both stem from it and

lead back to it. They are the very features that help to identify a specific culture. These experiential and cultural dimensions guarantee that an interest in proverbs is an interest in an authentic expression of culture. For philosophy this implies that proverbs take it to a genuine first-order philosophy, and more specifically to an authentic African philosophy, founded on culture and on its philosophy, thus safeguarding African philosophy from undue exogenous influences.

Experience alone, however, does not generate a proverb. Experience has to be coupled with observation. Lugbara proverbs convey this need for pondering over experience, for observing events to consider all sides of an issue in order to distinguish between appearance and reality and to appraise where true values lie. This pondering over experience relates proverbs to philosophy. In Plato's *Republic*, Socrates describes a philosopher as 'the observer of all time and all existence'. In the known Pythagorean metaphor, life is described as a large market to which some people go to do business, others to entertain themselves, and others just to observe all that is happening there, these last observers being the philosophers. Hence philosophy originates from observed experience just as proverbs do. Philosophers and proverbialists share the same interest.

The experience at the origin of a proverb and the observation that goes with it, though initially that of a person, need to be subsequently adopted by the social group to which the individual belongs in order to become a proverb. Proverbs are by their nature popular, namely, they are known and used by the entire population. They are communal or social assets just like culture. They truly echo a culture and not just the inventiveness of single persons who have first launched the proverb. Thus, here again, by considering proverbs, philosophy considers a genuine cultural dimension, not just a private statement or opinion. Proverbs are the trademark of culture guaranteeing its authenticity, and philosophy needs such sound premises for its analysis and conclusions.

The language of proverbs

The observed experience that originates a proverb is codified in pithy, fixed and sometimes allegorical language typical of proverbs. A proverb consists

of a short, pithy sentence. Proverbial utterances are often reduced to as few words as possible to communicate a message. The few words that constitute a proverb are so chosen and related as to convey their message with terseness and thrust. Hence proverbs represent a very effective way of communicating in which the language is put to its best use. They offer a model of a precise and concise use of language, brief but to the point, terse but very meaningful. This model stimulates an accurate selection of words for an effective manifestation of ideas. Proverbs are thus an inspiration to philosophy as, in its search for meaning, philosophy is quite often hampered by an abundance of words which obscure rather than clarify meaning.

The terse style of proverbs not only has linguistic value, it also indicates wisdom. Wisdom in fact, in Lugbara tradition, is associated with few words, properly chosen and timeously spoken. A proverb is regarded as a typical expression of such wisdom. While conveying wisdom, proverbs need wisdom in turn, in order to be used properly. The perception of the full expressiveness of a proverb requires time and experience, which are the basic components of wisdom. The wisdom that proverbs contain and inculcate is at the core of culture, helping to blend into unity the set of values that mould its soul. Philosophy is interested in wisdom as its ultimate objective; philosophers are said to be seeking wisdom beyond knowledge. Proverbs offer a rewarding way to it, straight and effective, as their terse language warrants.

Proverbs are also worded in a fixed form that needs to be sought in their main structure, as allowance must be made for variations resulting mostly from the nature of oral literature and the diversity of Lugbara culture. This fixity is important in an oral tradition as it codifies cultural developments, helping to pass them on more effectively. Proverbial sentences may be said to be the official statements of a cultural code, the type of statements from which philosophy starts in its analysis of meaning and of reality.

The language of proverbs is allegorical: it conveys its meaning by describing a subject under the guise of some other subject. Hence a proverb develops a meaning that differs from the literal meaning of the words used. The very word used for proverbs in Lugbara conveys the idea of metaphor. The term is *e'yo obeza,* literally meaning 'mixed words', or 'indirect talk'. Also the proverbs that appear to be literal have some implied reference to a

meaning that goes beyond their material expression. A metaphor stands on a dual meaning: a primary one given by the immediate appearance of a given expression, and a secondary one to which the first meaning is intended to refer. The relationship between the primary and secondary meanings is conditioned by the cultural context in which the metaphor is used and by the individual interpretation given to a metaphor. These two conditioning factors can give rise to equivocal meanings. Here philosophy is challenged, particularly as a second-order exercise, to help handle cultural metaphor and to clarify meaning, and to do so by remaining within a given culture, as metaphor is pinned to a specific culture. This further link with culture ensures a genuinely cultural and, in our case, African philosophy. Moreover, the metaphorical language inspires the use of images that enrich the mind and develop it in the use of abstract ideas, thus providing the tools of philosophy.

The message of proverbs

Lugbara proverbs fulfil themselves in a prescriptive objective in the sense that they are not merely stating a fact or reporting an experience but are conveying a message. Some proverbs appear to be merely descriptive in nature; but people tend to see a prescriptive message behind such description. This does not imply that the message is always moral. It could be amoral and also, in the opinion of some, immoral at times. It is difficult to prove each case with specific examples as proverbs are liable to different interpretations. In this connection, one needs to note that a proverb neither asserts nor denies a theoretical principle; it merely reflects an experience conveying a situational message without involving itself in an assessment of principles. The 'ought' of the proverb leaves an ample margin for tolerance. The implied sanction for disregarding a proverbial prescription is usually remote and it comes from the circumstances of life with nobody in particular intending to inflict it. When nothing follows the disregard of a proverbial prescription, people have an explanation to motivate that exception and to continue to uphold the validity of that proverb. This kind of 'ought' takes one to the field of ethics which is the ultimate objective of philosophy, according to many philosophers. Hence, proverbs and philosophy also meet in their final intent, which for both of them is human behaviour.

The prescriptive aspect of proverbs bears on values that play a unitary role at the heart of culture. They represent the best answers to the challenges that stimulate the creation of culture. Many of these values are entrusted to proverbs for preservation and transmission. And philosophy is involved in this through axiology or the philosophical study of values. As proverbs carry values, they stand in the way of mass culture in its drive to replace popular culture. Mass culture needs to introduce new values. This requires that whatever keeps the established values alive, such as proverbs, should be neutralised. The process from popular culture to mass culture requires that proverbs should be emptied of their values and reduced to mere curiosities of the past. Philosophy can help an appraisal of the values in proverbs and of the proverbs themselves. It can help to handle cultural change without losses, to preserve culture as a popular creation and proverbs as vehicles of values.

Conclusion

In trying to explain the present situation of philosophy, particularly in Africa, and the nature of Lugbara proverbs, the answer to the query about the present and future significance of proverbs and proverb study in philosophy, particularly in the African context, should have emerged. In concluding, some significant points could be recalled.

The relation between philosophy and proverbs passes through the concept of culture. Philosophy is interested in culture as in its own life context in which it is born and lives. Proverbs draw their existence from that same cultural experience. Hence, the interest of philosophy for culture leads to the proverbial expressions in the same culture. Philosophy is interested in proverbs as unique instances of culture.

Proverbs are produced by first-order philosophy and analysed by second-order philosophy. Hence a study of proverbs becomes an exercise in first and second-order philosophy.

Because proverbs span the whole range of human experience, they echo the variety and contradictory situations from which they originate. Proverbs differ as much as the life situation from which they derive. Thus proverbs

cannot be used to support some specific philosophical theories to the exclusion of others. Such exclusiveness would contradict the very nature of proverbs, which constitutes human experience in all its entirety and complexity. At the same time, if proverbs seem to have more than one meaning and to contradict each other, this does not imply that a proverb may mean or state anything. It simply indicates that a proverb mirrors many life situations. When used, however, the proverb is guided by the specific situation in which it is used and it has one consistent meaning within it.

The cultural basis of proverbs requires that their entire context should be kept in mind as a final term of reference to test the validity of their analysis and use. This is particularly relevant to philosophy as it insists that meaning is contextual. Since proverbs cannot be isolated from the life experience they belong to, one needs a sense of caution in using them outside their culture and in translating them into another culture. Also the written codification of proverbs needs to take this into account as such codification deprives proverbs of the living and cultural dimension that refines their meaning and effectiveness.

Proverbs offer an indispensable material for the development of philosophy. They contain the way in which a certain experience has been apprehended and pondered upon. They comprise and transmit some aspects of the worldview or philosophical elements of a people. But even though they draw from the entirety of life, they actually echo only some aspects of it. Consequently proverbs do not contain all the philosophy of a people. A people's *Weltanschauung* and oral philosophy is in their proverbs, but it also expands beyond them.

The future of proverbs needs to be considered in the light of the present cultural change, particularly the type leading from popular to mass culture. For proverbs, this change will mean losing their axiological dimension and becoming mere linguistic and historical cases. The interest of philosophy in axiology could help in securing proverbs as the assets of culture. There is a need for philosophy to continue its attention to proverbs, to their wisdom, to their values, to their language, to their origin, in a word, to their culture, which is the common matrix of both philosophy and proverbs.

Notes

1 The Lugbara live astride the Nile-Zaire divide in north-west Uganda, numbering about one million. Middleton, J, *The Lugbara of Uganda*, New York, Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1975, offers a concise account of them.

2 C Kluckhohn and A L Kroeber, *Culture. a critical review of concepts and definitions*, New York, Vintage Books, 1963, have a comprehensive survey of the meanings of culture.

3 E Cassirer, *An essay on man*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1944, develops this understanding of culture.

4 A significant Pan-African Seminar on the 'Problematics of an African Philosophy' took place from 1 to 3 December 1976 in Addis Ababa. Its proceedings are in C Sumner (ed) *African philosophy*, Addis Ababa University, Addis Ababa 1980. A Pan-African Symposium on the 'Problematics of an African Philosophy: twenty years after (1976–1996)' has been called for December 1996 in Addis Ababa by C Sumner.

5 For instance, M Heidegger in *Was ist das – die Philosophie?*, Pfullingen 1956, 6–7, argues that the term 'philosophy' in itself embodies Greekness and that the expression 'Western/European philosophy' is tautologous because philosophy is essentially Greek, implying that only the West and Europe have a philosophy in the strict sense of the term.

6 Kwasi Wiredu, 'Philosophy in Africa Today', March 1981 (mimeo), in H O Oruka and D A Masolo, *Philosophy and cultures*, Nairobi, Bookwise Ltd, 1983, p 23.

7 P Rossi, 'Cultura', in *Enciclopedia del Novecento*, Roma 1975, p 1155.

8 This is a brief summary of definitions found in dictionaries and of my experience in paremiography.

A critique of Western definitions of literature: proverbs as literature of the illiterate

'Makali I Mokitimi

Introduction

My paper will be presented in two ways. While the modelling method is appropriate for the first part of the paper, the reporting method will also be used because of my own experience in proverb research. The chronology of my topic is also important, because in my opinion it is proper to discuss the definition of literature before coming to the proverb as literature of the illiterate. The discussion on proverbs as literature of the illiterate has to be done in relation to early definitions of literature before the shift in literary theories.

A critical review of some Western definitions of literature

Many English dictionaries define literature as 'everything in print' (cf Hanks 1979:858, Allen 1991:692). It should be noted that the emphasis is on writing and reading. However, Wellek and Warren (1956:20) argue that such definitions are misleading because they limit literature to written or printed texts, leaving out what is now regarded as oral literature or verbal art. Wellek and Warren also argue that particular use of language in literature is suggestive that literature cannot be limited to written texts only. A definition of literature simply as 'that which is in written form' is therefore unsatisfactory.

Ruth Finnegan, a famous theorist of contemporary literary studies, points out that while literature in the Western sense tends to be defined as that which is written, there is also what can be called 'non-literature', the literature of the illiterate, primitive and uncivilised. She argues that in the cultures of so-called illiterate people there is at least the parallel of what

is generally termed literature in the West. Throughout the world, many societies that do not use writing as a form of communication possess lyrics, panegyric, poetry, song, prose, narratives, drama stylistics, dirges and epics. Finnegan (1988:64) quotes Kirk as saying that even the Homeric epic, which has been accepted as illuminating people's knowledge of humanity and the universe through the medium of writing, is generally accepted as having been composed orally.

Okpewho (1991), an African theorist, broadens the definition of literature as material contained in any volume of written or printed texts which appeals to our senses or emotions. He therefore posits that there is another form of literature, delivered by word of mouth and not written down. His contention is that such oral literature can be appreciated like written literature because it contains the same artistic characteristics of accurate observation, vivid imagination and ingenious expression. He develops this observation further (Okpewho 1994) by indicating that there are techniques and elements in written literature which may actually be seen as borrowings or remains of oral literature. He goes on to show that African writers in particular have consciously borrowed techniques from the oral tradition in constructing literary works dealing with modern life. An outstanding example can be found in the works of Chinua Achebe who employs several Ibo proverbs to enhance his works. Another author who is known to have borrowed material from oral tradition for his book *The palmwine drunkard* is Amos Tutuola.

The assumption that literature from non-literate societies is not 'really' literature because it lacks the technology of writing is therefore questionable. Oral creativity and delivery have existed as a medium of communication since before the invention of writing. The absence of writing, therefore, does not necessarily mean that a culture lacks literature and that the members of such societies therefore think differently from the societies which are regarded as 'literate'.

Literature primarily involves language and it is through *language* that communication takes place. Both written and oral literature can therefore serve as tools for communication and they can both influence a society's outlook on life and the perception of social environment.

There are similarities as well as differences between written and oral literature. According to Finnegan (1988:65) in written literature there is an 'artistic distance', meaning that there is a detachment between the author and the reader because they never come face to face. Yet in oral literature the artist of any literary genre comes face to face with the (sometimes familiar) audience. Another difference between written literature and oral literature is flexibility. In written literature the text is fixed, whereas in oral literature there is normally variability and changeability. Every time an oral performance is performed it undergoes anew the process of composition, thereby becoming different from previous performances. Oral literature is therefore flexible and adaptable, because at times the change in performance may be caused by the context; that is, the audience and occasion may force the artist to change his or her performance.

Having looked at some definitions of literature in the Western sense and having shown why and how recent theories have challenged these definitions, I now turn to the place and role of the proverb.

Proverbs as an oral literary genre

The discussion here will centre on my contention that proverbs are literature of the illiterate, as one of the stylised forms of oral literature. I will attempt this by discussing the following topics:

- The origin of proverbs
- Function and use of proverbs
- Stylistic nature of proverbs
- The intertextuality of proverbs.

The origin of proverbs

Before a proverb can be accepted as the lore of the people, it goes through several stages. In the first place, there has to be a situation in which a reaction can trigger the formulation of a proverb (cf Yankah 1989:117). Once the words which have been spoken by the person who had formulated

the reaction are accepted by the society, they become the people's lore. They stop being an individual's creation and become the possession of the society. This is why any form of oral literature is regarded as communal, not because it has no individual authorship. Several authors of literary works, such as Lord (1964), Finnegan (1977), Mokitimi (1991) and Swanepoel (1991) have demonstrated that an oral literary genre is not composed anonymously. These writers also dismiss the assumption that artists of oral literature are mere communicators of tradition. Like the authors of written literature, artists of oral literature rely on their own tradition to reveal their own experiences and feelings, creating proverbs from their observations, experiences and feelings. Proverb formulation is therefore a creative process and an event in its own right, although the acceptance of a proverb may take several generations, so that their origin and their authors are seldom individually known. In discussing the origin of the proverb, Mokitimi (1991:18) says:

> Proverbs reveal the feelings, emotions, and attitude of the speaker. They are later used in other situations bearing relevance to the first one. At this stage there is a speaker and listener and if these expressions make an impact on the listener, he too uses them in other situations. In this manner, the use of these statements, as expressions of observation and experiences, move from speaker to speaker until the society accepts them as part and parcel of its collective lore.

It also has to be noted that these utterances, thus created as proverbs, show emotional reactions, intellectual abilities and verbal competence. Taylor (1962) is therefore correct in characterising proverbs as: 'The wit of one, the wisdom of many'.

Function and use of proverbs

It seems to me that proverbs as oral literature in Africa function in particular as an effective means of exercising social control. The following specific Southern Sotho examples can be mentioned:

To teach:

Ngoana ea sa lleng so shoela tharing.
'A child who does not cry, dies on the back of his/her mother.'
(Dumb folks get no lands.)

To advise:

Koekoe ea morao e tloha le sepolo.
'The last quail is met by the hunting stick.'
(One who hesitates is lost.)

To encourage cooperation:

Bana ba monna ba ntsa sebata lefikeng.
'The sons of a man bring out the beast from the rocks.'
(Many hands make light work.)

To console:

Pere e oa e le maoto-mane.
'A horse may fall even though four-legged.'
(To err is human.)

To encourage and approve socially accepted behaviour:

Metla-khola o e lebisa ho oabo.
'A hoof-carver carves towards his own.'
(Charity begins at home.)

To disapprove or ridicule socially unacceptable behaviour:

Nogana ma-hana-a-joetsoa o bonoa ka likhapha.
'A child who refuses to be advised encounters tears.'
(A person who does not heed advice suffers.)

However, the function of proverbs may differ from situation to situation, depending on the context. And the context is often determined by the identity of the participants. The occasion normally reveals things such as how, why, where and when a particular proverb is used. According to Shippey (1976:29):

> A proverb is useless and incommunicable without a particular situation to give it birth. Text leaves out the non-linguistic part of the proverb, ie the emotional and situational contexts which tell how, why, and by whom they were used.

The contextual usage of proverbs has been expressed by Yankah

(1989:27) as follows: 'There is no proverb without discourse' (cf also Shippey 1976:29; Chapman 1974:9; and Yankah 1989:5). The meaning of the proverb, therefore, depends on where and when it is employed, and on the interaction between the speaker and the participants in a given context. The different contexts of proverb usage also affirm the polygenic behaviour of proverbs depending on the speaker's repertoire of proverbs. This means that one proverb can be used in different situations and that several other proverbs can be used in the same situation.

Stylistic nature of proverbs

Proverbs are regarded as stylised forms, structured in a way that makes them poetic. The following linguistic features contribute to the stylistic form of the proverbs:

- A basic pattern of subject, predicate and object:
  Leshala le tsoala molora.
  'Amber begets ashes.'
  (A good parent may have a worthless child.)

- Word group arrangement: parallelism, repetition, etc:
  Khakhi o khakha se sa mo khakheng le borokong.
  'The person loves the one who does not love him/her even in sleep.'
  (Used of loving someone who does not return the love.)

  Moromuoa ha a na lonya, lonya le na le khaloli.
  'The messenger has no malice; malice is with the initiator.'
  (Blame falls on those in authority and not on the subject.)

  Ma-rema-tlou a ntswe-leng.
  'The elephant hunters are in unison.'
  (Success presupposes cooperation.)

  (Motho) Ea lutseng hole le lefa ha a le je.
  '(A person) who lives far away from the inheritance does not eat it.'
  (Absentee landlords gather no crops.)

Mofati oa seliba ha a se noe.
'The well digger does not drink from it.'
(What one does often benefits others.)

- Sound patterns in African tonal languages:
  The structure of the proverbs (in this case Sesotho) indicates that the anonymous authors of proverbs have availed themselves of the techniques of Sesotho poetry.

The use of these stylistic devices confirms that a proverb is a poetic micro-text and that the various linguistic features and modifications contribute to the poetic nature of the proverb.

The intertextuality of proverbs

The intertextual aspect of proverbs has not been given the attention it deserves. This observation has been made by Mieder (1980:51), who observed that most proverb studies have concentrated on proverbs occurring in drama and prose but none in poetry; yet there is a strong relationship between poetry and proverb. The occurrence of proverbs in various texts has been a strategy of enhancing the macro-texts in which proverbs are found. There are situations where proverb texts are not applied to face to face situations and where they have therefore changed to new habitats. This new habitat has changed and transformed the use of proverbs from practical situations, where there is participation and interaction between the proverb's speaker and the audience, to situations of author-reader. In this way the proverb has become desituationalised and decontextualised from a social situation of interaction and participation (cf Mokitimi 1991:179). In recent years more scholars seem to have noticed the importance of the use of proverbs in other texts, and have employed proverbs in their writings. We have seen how Chinua Achebe is famous for using Ibo proverbs in his works. In Sesotho literature, Moleleki (1989) in his master's thesis has discussed the use of Sesotho proverbs in Maphalla's poetry. Although in its original stage the proverb became the people's voice, after it is employed in other texts its author steps down and in his place the modern author takes charge of the new situation. The intertextuality of proverbs thus reveals itself in the observation of the

voice of the original author of the proverb, the voice of the people and then the voice of the present poet or author.

Conclusion

This paper has been an attempt to review a controversial subject: Western definitions of literature. This definition has been challenged by some modern literary theorists who show that literature, whether from a literate or non-literate society, is literature in the proper sense. Western definitions of literature have therefore been challenged because they limit themselves to literature produced by writing and consumed by reading. They also ignore other written materials which can be regarded as literature. The argument has also been that written literature is a product of oral literature. Over and above these arguments, it has also been indicated that modern writers use material from oral literature to enhance their own writings. Secondly, the discussion has shown the place of proverbs in literature. In the discussion I have illustrated why proverbs are not literature of the illiterate, but simply literature in the proper sense, literature *per se*. I have also given a few examples to illustrate this point of view. I hope the discussion will contribute to literary scholars' perception of proverbs as part of a great literary tradition, both oral and written.

Le me conclude with the following Sesotho proverbs:

Khomo ha e nye bolokoe kaofela.
'The cattle does not excrete all the dung at the same time.'
(It is impossible to say all, or everything, at once.)

Belo lea fela, thota e sale
'The speed comes to an end, the distance remains.'
(Vast areas of life remain unexplored.)

Ea khaola, ea ea
'It unfastens itself, and there it goes.'
(The end.)

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Proverbs as a source of African philosophy: a methodological consideration

Heinz Kimmerle

Introduction

Traditional African philosophy has been handed down through the centuries only partially by means of written documents. Primarily written sources of philosophy we find above all in ancient Egypt and in Ethiopia. Cheikh Anta Diop, a historian, philosopher, and politician in Senegal, and others have tried to gain acceptance for the theory that the wisdom of ancient Egypt is the cradle not only of African philosophy, but also to a remarkable extent of Western philosophy. This remains rather hypothetical, but there is no doubt that the documents of the ancient Egyptian mysteries are important sources of African philosophy.

Ethiopian philosophical texts are of enormous value, too, although I feel that African philosophers themselves have not come close to giving them the attention they deserve. The particular value of these sources for African philosophy, however, lies not so much in the fact that they were written down, but much more importantly in that as early as the fifth century AD they amalgamated Western and African thought from the standpoint of an African culture. Thus they can fulfil a historic-propaedeutic function for current African thought, in which similar processes are taking place on a large scale.

Political philosophy, produced during the period of the struggle for independence and the first phase of the creation of independent African states, and academic philosophy, as practised since the 1950s in the philosophy departments of African universities, were put into writing in the same way as texts in a culture with primarily written forms of communication and the transmission of traditions. The writings of Senghor and Nkrumah, Cabral and Touré, Kenyatta and Nyerere were discussed in Africa during the fifties and sixties on a broad scale. And since the emergence of African universities a vivid debate on African philosophy has taken place. To be sure, the spreading and availability of these texts is a major problem in Africa, because they are more often to be found, and in a more complete

form, in libraries outside Africa than in the collections of African institutes and universities.

However, if it is true, as I have stated elsewhere,[1] that the work of the 'sages' in traditional African culture is characteristic of the specifically African in the philosophy of this continent, which is also contained in these texts, we can assume that important philosophical elements can be found in the primarily oral tradition. The pronouncements of the 'sages', of which only remnants are currently written down, have to be seen as speech acts which did not occur in isolation within African languages, but were embedded in a tradition of narration and counselling.

Within a framework of thought determined by Western philosophy, I feel that the first task should be to deconstruct the generally accepted opposition of written and oral communication. Thinking in terms of oppositions, for instance in regard to cultures having or lacking a form of writing ('lettered' and 'unlettered' cultures), belongs to the tradition of Western metaphysical thought since Plato and Aristotle. The philosophical systems of Plato and Aristotle, the Neoplatonists and the thinkers of the Middle Ages – Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz, Bacon, Hume and Locke, Kant, Fichte, Schelling and Hegel, to mention only a few of the best-known – are constructed by means of oppositions: the heavenly and the sublunary spheres, theory and practice, the single and the many, good and evil, right and wrong, true and false, etc. To obtain a clear view of traditional African philosophy, it is very important that the difference between primarily oral and primarily written forms of communication and tradition is not interpreted in this traditional way as indicating that they are mutually exclusive or in opposition to each other.

African philosophers are certainly aware that the transition from primarily oral to primarily written forms of communication and tradition, which typified the situation in philosophy during the fifties, has resulted in both profit and loss. Odera Oruka from the University of Nairobi has stated that with the introduction of writing as the primary medium of communication and transmission, memory slackens.[2] The coherent structure of life which exists when communications are on a primarily oral level is slowly dying out in the current situation, so that many invaluable philosophically wise teachings, among other things, are being lost for good.

It is recognised that various African peoples (for instance in what are now Liberia, Sierra Leone, Nigeria and Cameroon) have known writing, in the sense of writing down what was said, in a particular period of their history. However, because writing of this sort had no clear function in the coherent communication and the handing down of traditions, it sank into oblivion.[3] Currently, opinions vary among African philosophers with regard to the significance of written texts as compared to primarily oral transmissions. In his *Critique of ethnophilosophy*, Hountondji, from Cotonou in Benin, maintains that philosophy without written texts cannot be recognised as such, while Olabiyi Yai – a countryman of Hountondji who was educated in Ibadan in Nigera and is currently teaching in Gainesville, Florida – places an especially high value on the role and significance of orally transmitted philosophical thought. The latter refers to Finnegan's research in which the specific significance of orally transmitted cultural matter is clearly elaborated.[4]

Credit must go to Jacques Derrida for having developed a new concept of writing in his book *De la grammatologie* (Paris 1967). Previously lettered and unlettered cultures were regarded as opposites to each other, with writing seen as a sign for the spoken word, which itself figures as a sign for a thing. Derrida overcomes this with a concept of writing which is not based on a theory of signs, and in which the writing is of secondary importance. Bearing the theory of signs in mind, and then going beyond it, Derrida emphasises – continuing from Lacan – that there is no final indicated thing, that everything which is indicated (signifié) is also a indicator (signifiant) and that this continues in an everlasting chain. In this way writing can be lifted out of its secondary position. What is written has the advantage over what is heard in that it can be constantly reread and reinterpreted. An ultimate valid interpretation is not only impossible, but is no longer sought. This leads to difficult questions about the concept of truth. As far as the concept of writing is concerned, the result is that writing is no longer conceived of as a (by definition secondary) sign, but a 'trace', which is read in an of itself endless context of references.

If writing is understood in this manner as a 'visible and readable trace', one can postulate that it is as old as spoken language. Footprints in the sand, a broken branch or scattered stones are just as much forms of writing as scratches on rocks or gourds, scars indicating membership of a family

or sex, warpaint on the body, little pictures representing words (hieroglyphics), or the letters of an alphabet. There is not more of a hierarchy among the various types of writing than there is between written and spoken language. Derrida makes clear that spoken language has been given precedence in the history of Western metaphysics from Plato's thesis in his *Seventh letter* that truth cannot be written down, via Rousseau's characterising of writing as simply an aid to remembering what has been said verbally, to Hegel's belief that, because of its relatively immaterial character, spoken language is closer to the idea than any type of writing. According to Derrida this means that Western metaphysics is not only characterised by a logocentrism in which 'logos', that is, rational thinking, stands at the centre, but also by a phonocentrism, which prefers the *phone*, the voice or the spoken language, to what is written.

In Derrida's thinking, which must lead to a revaluation of the relationship between primarily oral and primarily written communication and transmission, a paradoxical change of direction occurs at this point. He draws a line from logocentrism via phonocentrism to ethnocentrism, and in the following manner. On the one hand, the thinking of the Western metaphysicist regards writing as a sign which is secondary to spoken language, and on the other hand, this same thinking expresses a clear preference for lettered cultures as opposed to unlettered cultures in which oral communication is of primary importance. This is completely inconsistent because Western metaphysical thought, in concurrence with the higher evaluation of spoken language, should give preference to those cultures in which oral communication and transmission of traditions are of primary importance. This paradox, however, is not a fault in the development of Derrida's thinking, but is inherent in Western metaphysical thinking. It is in this that the ethnocentrism becomes evident. According to Derrida, this ethnocentrism also appears in the work of Lévi-Strauss when he expresses his great admiration for 'wild thinking' and gives fairly nostalgic descriptions of the innocence and beauty of natural peoples, because in this connection he maintains the opposition of lettered and unlettered cultures.

In Derrida's thinking the opposition between spoken language and writing, as well as every hierarchical relationship between them, is dropped. They stand side by side, constantly fulfilling different functions

of language. They are equally original and both have their history of origin in the process of hominisation as such. Because they are both functions of language, these functions overlap: oral forms of communication and transmission always contain elements of writing as well, and in writing, elements of the spoken language are always present. In the first case, reference can be made to fixed formulas in language and to the significant arrangements connected to certain situations of speech; consider religious or judicial rituals, or the situation of narration and listening which appears to play an important role in African communities. In the second case, the presence of elements of oral language in writing is expressed in certain styles and genres, even if these do not directly demand an oral presentation.

Language as the source of philosophy

Language is the medium in which philosophy works. Philosophy draws its questions and the possible answers from language. That is not just the case since the 'linguistic turn' in the history of Western philosophy, through which idealistic philosophy's paradigm of consciousness was replaced by the paradigm of the concrete languages. It can be seen particularly in a number of great philosophies in the Western tradition where something is stated in language and by means of language, which previously could not be said, but which is very expressive, even though occasionally it can take some time before such new expressions become accepted. Kant's term 'transcendental' and the meaning he gave to the word 'critique' are just as striking examples of this as Hegel's 'an sich', 'für sich' and 'an und für sich', or Heidegger's 'In-der-Welt-sein', or the formulations that 'the language talks', 'the thing things' which are still very difficult even today. Aristotle clearly related his method to language when he started from 'legethai' (what 'one says') and then tried to create clarity and precision within it.

Seen in this light, the work of Placide Tempels and the other ethno-philosophers, who endeavour to draw a philosophy from the language of an African people, is original philosophical work. Language is understood very broadly: it includes grammatical structure as well as the meanings of words and word combinations; and also myths, poetry and stories, sayings

and proverbs play an important role. Apparently it has no effect on the result if a *Belgian* missionary tries to describe the thinking of a Bantu people, the *Luba*, as long as he speaks the language of this people well. The Ruandan theologian and philosopher Alexis Kagame has confirmed through extensive language research the propositions of the Belgian Tempels, which in general – despite initial strong criticism – have penetrated on a large scale into the research and the teaching of African philosophy.

In this manner the ethno-philosophers stand precisely at the point of transition from primarily oral to primarily written forms of expression in African philosophy. It is a misconception to think that they wish to present the collective thinking of a people, expressed in its language, as philosophy, as Hountondji in particular has remarked critically.[5] They are individuals, philosophical authors, who clarify and define the philosophical thoughts present in a language. One can also say – and here I agree with the words of Oluwole from Lagos – that ethno-philosophers examine the way in which sayings and proverbs, certain ideas and ideals, and also myths, poetry and narratives form the 'philosophical substratum of the thinking of a people'.[6] That this process can necessitate an enormous interpretative effort is made clear by Oluwole with a Yoruba proverb: 'Let the eyes see, but keep the mouth shut', in which the following ethical clue is hidden: 'It is not ALL things your eyes see that your mouth should report.' It is then relevant to ask at which point seeing and keeping silent should merge.

Philosophical work in language and about language can also be carried out without the creation of written texts. The sages (wise teachers, both male and female) formulate their advice about difficult practical questions of life and about the riddles of the universe and human life in a conversation which frequently results in a saying or a proverb. They use proverbs in a specific way and are often themselves the 'inventors' of proverbs with a philosophical content. Their advice or story doesn't result directly in an instruction as to what should be done in a particular situation. The proverb is formulated in such a general way that an interpretation is required, and only then does the concrete advice appear. Moreover, the advice can more easily be remembered if it takes the form of a terse saying or proverb. Other people who give advice or who are telling a story or speak in another way can also be the originators of proverbs, philosophical proverbs included.

In this way, sayings and proverbs are elements of the written in an oral transmission. Gyekye from Ghana explicitly mentions the sages as possible inventors of proverbs.[7] Even if the individual origin of a proverb cannot be demonstrated, at some point it had to be used for the first time. It implies an *auctor* ('originator'), an author. Konaté from the Ivory Coast emphasises that it is important to make clear the connection between proverbs and their authors in the situation of primarily oral transmission. According to him a proverb may be connected with an ethnic group or people, but its origin is not a 'collective production'. The first use is always individual and personal. Because a certain formulation finds a broad echo in a community, it becomes part of the general usage and ultimately sinks into the collective memory.[8] Of course, not all proverbs have a philosophical content. However, there is a special relationship between proverbs and philosophy to the extent that philosophy has its primary place in the medium of spoken language.

This does not mean, of course, that proverbs do not play a role in the written sources of traditional African philosophy. Very important documents of Ethiopian philosophy from the sixteenth and seventeenth century such as the *Maxims* of Skendes and the *Hatata* of Zera Yacob, were written down only because there was an occasional quest to do it. They are just the written version of a primarily oral teaching and advice for practical life problems.

Let me summarise in a scheme the various sources of African philosophy and the place of proverbs within them:

Primarily oral sources	Primarily written sources
Language	Ancient Egyptian
Sages and others	Ethiopian philosophy 5th–17th century
Ethno-philosophy	Political and academic philosophy in
Symbols eg Adincra symbols	20th century
in Ghana	
---------->Proverbs <----------	---------->Proverbs <----------

Proverbs and philosophy

Some of the African philosophers who use a partially ethno-philosophical method place special emphasis on the proverbs in their language. This is

true of Abraham from Ghana, who has been living for a long time already in California, Mbiti from Kenya, who taught at the Makerere University in Uganda and currently works in Switzerland, Wiredu from Ghana, currently at the University of Southern Florida in Tampa, and Gyekye, also from Ghana and at the moment living in Washington DC.[9] The latter gives a survey of the sources of traditional African philosophy and discusses the particular significance of proverbs. The following are mentioned as sources: 'proverbs, myths and folktales, folk songs, rituals, beliefs, customs, and traditions of the people ... its art symbols and its sociopolitical institutions and practices'. After referring to the philosophical impact of the 'symbolic character' of African art, Gyekye deals with a number of arguments for the specifically philosophical significance of proverbs, which can be found in the book by Mbiti. According to Mbiti they are 'repositories of traditional beliefs, ideas, wisdom and feelings'. But we have to take into account that their philosophical content 'is mainly situational'.[10]

The Akan use a proverb to express the close relationship of proverbs to situations: 'If the occasion has not arisen, the proverb does not come' or in a positive version: 'When the occasion arises, it calls for a proverb.' Thus it may be necessary to know the local facts belonging to a particular proverb. If the Akan say: 'No one sells his chicken without a reason', a situation is imagined in which everyone knows that a chicken is a valuable possession. For the Akan, proverbs are also often conclusions drawn from a story or a fable. After a story is told in which someone's egoistical behaviour has painful results, Ananse, a spider who as a rule provides clever solutions in difficult situations, concludes: 'If you do not let your neighbour have nine, you will not have ten.'

With this last proverb in mind, I suggested in my first book on African philosophy that not only the situation in which a proverb is used should be involved in the interpretation, but also the one in which it arises. Frequently this situation will have to be extrapolated from the proverb itself. In the example under discussion, a situation is supposed in which peaceful neighbours are living together in a village. One can contrast this with people who are nomadic or live alone, that is to say, have a lifestyle in which this situation does not, or does not yet, exist. Sedentary life only provides advantages if the peace among neighbours is maintained, if

competition and envy are not dominant. Accordingly this proverb can be interpreted not simply as a 'rejection of ethical egoism', as happens in Gyekye's book, but the interpretation is given an extra dimension in which the imagined social situation, as it is embedded in a cultural-historic context, has to be regarded as significant.[11]

According to Gyekye, the special relationship between proverbs and philosophy for the Akan rests on the affinity between a proverb and a palm tree, which can be etymologically demonstrated: in Twi, the language of the Akan, a proverb is 'ebe', a palm tree is 'abe'. The products of the palm tree – palm oil, palm wine, palm soap, etc – are produced by means of distillation. It seems surprising at times that these products can be got from a palm tree. Production involves a great deal of work. Similarly, proverbs are distilled from everyday language. They form terse, compressed formulations and often enough they have an enigmatic, elliptical or even a cryptic character. This applies especially to proverbs with a clear philosophical content. One example is a proverb about destiny, which no one can avoid: 'Unless you die of God, let living man kill you, and you will not perish', and one about African logic, which is often expressed in metaphors: 'There are no crossroads in the ear.' This last example is interpreted by Gyekye as an Akan formulation of the principle of contradiction.

This characteristic of Akan proverbs can be directly compared to Hegel's explanation of the process of philosophising. Hegel emphasises above all the density of philosophical concepts. According to him, the process which must lead to this density is a difficult one; he talks about the 'effort of the concept' or also about the task of bringing something 'to the concept'. In the foreword to his *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts* (Berlin 1821) there is the famous statement: 'Philosophie ist ihre Zeit in Gedanken erfaßt'. Russell describes in more detail this character of philosophy which apparently runs parallel to proverbs and the process of their creation. In the foreword to his *History of Western philosophy* (London 1946) he says, without referring to the close relationship between philosophy and language which is assumed here: 'I have tried ... to exhibit each philosopher as ... a man in whom were crystallized and concentrated thoughts and feelings which, in a vague and diffused form, were common to a community of which he was a part.'

How systematic should philosophy be?

In order to make a comparison with African proverbs, Gyekye takes examples which are formulated as aphorisms from Western and Eastern philosophies. By so doing he wishes to show that the Akan proverbs which he mentions and interprets are the equal of these examples. Thus the Akan proverb 'No destiny is the same as another' is placed next to Socrates' statements 'Virtue is knowledge' or 'No one willingly does wrong' and Confucius' aphorism 'He who learns but does not think is lost, he who thinks but does not learn is in danger'. Reference is also made to the fragments of the pre-Socratics, in which important philosophical ideas are summarised in a few short sentences. However, Gyekye is not satisfied with the philosophy in proverbs. On the one hand, he regards certain proverbs as true philosophy; on the other hand he wants more. He wants to explain the philosophical system of the Akan. In this connection proverbs are 'sources' for this system.

Gerald J Wanjohi from Nairobi is also working on the explanation of an African philosophy on the basis of proverbs, in his case the philosophy of the Gikuyu. Without any doubt the first question is: Which proverbs have a philosophical content and can be considered philosophy or a source for philosophy? Gyekye and Wanjohi have at their disposal an extensive collection of the proverbs in Twi and the language of the Gikuyu.[12] They can select philosophically relevant proverbs from this material and other sources. As a second step, it is important to classify the proverbs according to certain themes. Thematic classification also takes place in other areas of the research into proverbs outside philosophy. The principles for classification are always taken from outside to a certain extent: proverbs on family life, women, history, good behaviour, destiny, life after death, etc.

Selecting and classifying proverbs with a philosophical content has to remain provisional. It depends on the understanding of the philosopher which proverbs he or she will regard as philosophical. In principle all proverbs can turn out to be used as a source of philosophy or as a subject of philosophical interpretation.

Proverbs are mostly not the only source which is used in order to find out or to reconstruct what the philosophy of an African people is. Gyekye

is trying to build up a system in which the whole of the Akan philosophy can be expressed. For that purpose the proverbs are one of the principal sources. But there are other important sources: the language itself, the customs of the people, art, religion, political life, etc. All these have been the subject of different scientific disciplines. Therefore, an interdisciplinary approach is necessary: linguistics, cultural anthropology, art criticism, religious studies and political sciences can help to investigate these areas. And it is vital to speak with the sages in the villages about their philosophical ideas. As a result 'The Akan conceptional scheme' can be reconstructed.

In organising the material of the proverbs, in his work Wanjohi follows the systematic classification of philosophy as it has been worked out in Western traditions. In 1990 he published a contribution to the theory of knowledge of the Gikuyu, in which, at the same time, the epistemological status of the proverbs in question was demonstrated as 'philosophical'.[13] In addition he is working on contributions to metaphysics and the philosophy of religion, ethics and political philosophy, and other systematic disciplines in the Gikuyu philosophy. One can question whether the classification system of Western philosophy is not too much the guide to the different divisions and subdivisions of the philosophy of an African people.

I feel that the working methods of both African colleagues also give rise to the following question: How systematic should philosophy be? They are not alone in working in this way: Charles S Bird and Ivan Karp are the general editors of a series of books published in Bloomington/Indianapolis under the title *African systems of thought*. Hasn't the attempt to find a more or less complete system been inspired by the example of the great systems of Western philosophy? I mention only Aristotle, Thomas, Descartes, Spinoza, Hegel, Whitehead and the contemporary German philosopher Hermann Schmitz. I realise that this attempt of African philosophers is also motivated by resistance to assertions from the colonial period that 'the Africans' would not be capable of logical and systematic thought. It could have seemed that African philosophies would be considered the equal to those in the West only if they were systematically constructed.

Within Western philosophies, however, the precedence of systematic philosophising is no longer valid. During the Romantic period a preference

for epigrams arose, and the entire philosophical programme of this period was only fragmentally developed. In the work of Nietzsche, the breakthrough of aphoristic philosophy as 'great' philosophy took place. In *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen 1927) Heidegger arrived at a project of the destruction of the metaphysical systems in Western history, and nowadays Derrida occupies himself with the deconstruction of these systems. Wittgenstein, in his early work, argued according to a series of propositions which did reveal a certain systematic construction; however, his later work is clearly aphoristic. The idea of 'language games', which is central to that work, is also characteristic of his writing style. In the *Negative Dialektik* (Frankfurt am Main 1966) Adorno criticised systematic philosophising broadly and penetratingly, and argued in favour of developing models which relate to particular concrete situations, and for making visible constellations which can change, depending on the appearance of the historical context. At the same time that these authors were criticising systematic philosophy and attempting to break it down, art took on an important function both in and for their philosophy.

In the later work of Heidegger the relationship between philosophy (thinking) and language was placed in a totally new dimension. After everything that has happened in the history of Western philosophy, after a gigantic accumulation of traditions and a steadily rising flood of written documents, it turned out to be an extremely difficult task to return to *speaking simply*, without there being a diminution in quality. In this connection, Heidegger tried to reconstruct what was thought in certain words by tracing their etymology. He was busy collecting basic words for thinking from his own language, as the ancient Greek philosophers had done. In this way he worked at the task of finding 'another beginning' for philosophy (or as he himself said: thinking). In doing this he experienced the existence of a close relationship between thinking and poetry, that they 'are neighbours'. When he was quite old, he began to study Chinese in order to be able to read Lao Tse in the original.

Whatever the case may be, it is not my concern to replace the precedence of systematic philosophy with the precedence of aphoristic or any other non-systematic philosophies. Up to a certain point philosophy will be and remain systematic;[14] this is already a given by the meaning of argumentation in and for every philosophy. Systematic philosophising, also

in the form of 'open systems', is, however, only one type of philosophy, besides which aphoristic, epigrammatic, fragmentary and other forms of philosophy have their own right and value. That makes room for a multiple use of proverbs as philosophy and as sources of philosophy. On the one hand, a collection of proverbs is not a philosophical book. Philosophically relevant proverbs have to be recognised as such, selected and organised thematically, before they can play a role as philosophy. On the other hand, JC Thomas's warning is appropriate here. He writes in his introduction to Ackah's book about *Akan ethics* (Accra 1988, p 20) that 'the temptation must ... be avoided to impose system and order on what is not systematically presented'.

It is not up to me to decide whether, and to what extent, African philosophies should be systematic. Given the significance of proverbs for philosophy and the special significance which they have in primarily oral communication and transmission, I would like to conclude with my question: How systematic should African philosophy be? As far as Africa is concerned, only African philosophers can give an answer to this question. It will depend on this answer how they will deal with proverbs and other non-primarily written sources in their philosophical work, how they will use proverbs as philosophy and as a source of philosophy.

Notes

1 H Kimmerle: *Afrikanische Philosophie als Weisheitslehre?* In R A Mall/D Lohmar (eds), *Philosophische Grundlagen der Interkulturalität.* Amsterdam/Atlanta, Ga 1993 (Studien zur interkulturellen Philosophie 1), p 159–180.

2 H Odera Oruka: *Sagacity in African Philosophy. International Philosophical Quarterly* 23 (1983), see pages 391–392.

3 K Wiredu: *Philosophy and an African culture.* Cambridge 1980, p 40, note 3.

4 P J Hountondji: *African philosophy. Myth and reality.* London 1983, p 55; O Yai: *Theory and practice in African philosophy. The poverty of speculative philosophy. Second Order* 6 (2) (1977); R Finnegan: *Oral literature in Africa.* Oxford 1970.

5 P J Hountondji, oc, Part 1, chapters 1 and 2.

6 S B Oluwole: *Witchcraft, reincarnation and the God-Head*. Lagos 1992, pp 56–60; see also for the following.

7 K Gyekye: *An essay on African philosophical thought. The Akan conceptual scheme*. Cambridge 1987, p 19.

8 Y Konaté: *Le syndrome Hampaté Bâ ou Comment naissent les proverbes. Quest. An International African Journal of Philosophy* 8, 2 (1994), p 23–44.

9 W E Abraham: *The mind of Africa*. Chicago 1962; JS Mbiti: *African Religions and Philosophy*. London 1969; K. Wiredu, oc (in note 3); K Gyekye, oc (in note 7).

10 Gyekye, oc, pp 13–15; see for the following 16–23.

11 H Kimmerle: *Philosophie in Afrika – afrikanische Philosophie*. Frankfurt am Main 1991, pp 46 and 123.

12 J G Christaller: *A collection of 3 600 Twi proverbs*. Basel 1879; R S Rattray: *Ashanti proverbs*. Oxford, 1916; G Barra: *1 000 Gikuyu proverbs*. London 1960; N Njururi: *Gikuyu proverbs*. London 1969.

13 G J Wanjohi: *The philosophy of Gikuyu proverbs. An epistemological contri bution*. In: H Oosterling/F de Jong (eds), *Denken unterwegs. Philosophie im Kräftefeld sozialen und politische Engagements. Festschrift für Heinz Kimmerle zu seinem 60. Geburtstag*. Amsterdam 1990, pp 383–394.

14 It is important to note that what is at stake here is the *presentation* of philosophical thought, not the thought itself (or 'thinking-as-philosophy' à la Heidegger on page 95 above). I am referring primarily to the outward aspect of philosophy therefore.

The ontology, epistemology, and ethics inherent in proverbs the case of the Gîkûjû

G J Wanjohi

Introduction

This paper undertakes to explore whether traditional African philosophy exists and, if so, in what form? There are those who hold the view that Africans are incapable of philosophy, given their low calibre of intelligence, thus relegating their thought to mere emotionalism. On the side of those who affirm that there *is* African philosophy, a number of positions are held. There are those who maintain that African thought as thought is philosophy. This view gives rise to what is known as ethnophilosophy, a term which is amenable to a number of interpretations and refinements. Another view is that African philosophy is to be found in the thought of elders or sages, and that all that is needed is to get these sages to express their thoughts. One of the originators and an ardent exponent of sage philosophy is Professor Odera Oruka of Nairobi University. However, there is a difficulty in sage philosophy as taught by Oruka in that his sages are not pure traditionalists, but people with Christian names, whose thinking cannot have remained uninfluenced by their new faith. Still another view is that African philosophy should be confined to the thought of modern scholars who have received their philosophical training either at home or abroad.

My own understanding of African philosophy is that it should be as authentically *philosophy* and as authentically *African* as possible. These two criteria are not met, in my view, by any of the positions just reviewed.

At this stage, it is necessary to say what philosophy is and what it deals with. There are many definitions of philosophy, but for my purpose I shall choose that definition of it which says that 'philosophy is the love of wisdom'. According to this definition, a philosopher does not claim to be wise or to possess knowledge, but is one who is imbued with a passion to know all things. 'All things' does not mean simply physical or material things, but psychological, moral and spiritual things as well, in other words, all reality.

It turns out that philosophy so conceived studies things in themselves or in their inner nature (ontology); how and by what means people acquire the knowledge of things or reality (epistemology); and the right conduct for humanity, that is, one which is in conformity with human nature (ethics).

My study of Gîkûyû proverbs has revealed that they imply ontology, epistemology, and ethics. A hermeneutical study of these proverbs should therefore yield an authentic African philosophy. But before turning to that study, I would like to highlight some concrete problems addressed by ontology, epistemology and ethics.

Ontology or metaphysics (the two terms are synonymous) is defined as the study of being *qua* being. As such, it treats of being in all its scope and manifestations: material, spiritual, real, apparent, finite, infinite, caused, uncaused, perfect, imperfect, etc. Epistemology or the theory of knowledge deals with the questions of the meaning, origin, certainty, scope and limitations of knowledge, error and scepticism, among others. Philosophers are not unanimous as to which is prior, metaphysics or epistemology. There are good reasons in support of either position. There are three approaches to ethics, namely, deontology, teleology, and metaethics. Deontology means doing one's duty for duty's sake, without seeking or expecting any reward. Deontology is expressed in a categorical statement: 'Duty shall be done.' The philosopher Emmanuel Kant is a classical deontologist. As the term implies, teleological ethics is concerned with doing the right thing in order to achieve a certain goal, *telos*, such as peace, pleasure, or happiness. It is expressed in a hypothetical statement: 'If you want Y, do X.' Most philosophers are teleologists. Both deontological and teleological ethics are prescriptive, that is, they commend certain things as morally good. Metaethics is not prescriptive but analytical, being concerned with talking about or clarifying the meanings of ethical terms such as 'good', 'right', 'bad', 'wrong', 'duty'.

The metaphysics inherent in Gîkûyû proverbs

As already mentioned, there is an ontology or metaphysics in Gîkûyû proverbs. This is contained in a number of themes which can be grouped into five pairs as follows:

1 Imperfection of creatures and the perfection of God
2 Appearance and reality
3 Uniqueness of things and their interdependence
4 Freedom and determinism
5 Cause and effect.

In order to make my study more manageable – but at the same time understandable – I shall select from each group the most representative proverbs for consideration.

1 Imperfection in general is taught by the following two proverbs:

- *Gûtirî kîndû gîtarî kîîgerero gîakîo* (Be109). ('There is nothing so good it cannot be improved.')
- *Gûtirî kîndû kîagaga guca hana* (Be120). ('There is nothing com pletely flawless.')

As regards human beings, imperfection is expressed by, among others, the following proverbs:

- *Mûthuuthîra igîrî ndagaga îmwe îcura* (Ba431). ('If one is roasting two [potatoes], one of them is bound to get charred.')
- *Kîrîîkanîro gîtigiragia ndeto ihîtane* (N263). ('An agreement does not prevent things from going wrong.')

All these imperfections bear a great contrast with respect to God's perfection and omnipotence, as highlighted in the following proverbs:

- *Guoko kwa Ngai gûtieraga* (Be68). ('God's hand does not waver.')
- *Mwaki wa Ngai ûraaragio nî igoto* (N417). ('God's fire is kept alive by a dry banana bark.') This proverb has its origin in Gîkûyû religious rituals in which a fire lit for God was observed to be sustained by almost nothing, and so people did not have to worry about it. (Instead of using the pairs imperfect/perfect, one can employ the pairs finite/infinite or caused/uncaused and the result will be the same.)

2 The distinction between appearances and reality is taught by the proverbs:

- *Gûcekeha ti gûicûhio* (Ba69). ('To be thin is not the result of being bared.')

- *Gûthekio ti kwendwo* (Ba87). ('To be smiled at does not mean one is loved.')

These proverbs are telling us that things are not always what they seem to be or look like, that there can be a difference between appearances and reality. Somebody who looks thin and weak may be very strong. The first proverb is addressed to people who like bullying others and go about vaunting their strength. (The alternate form of this proverb is *Gûkuhîha ti gûtinio* (N83). ('To be short is not the result of being cut.') The second proverb is a warning to all of us not to take too seriously people who smile at us or outwardly show friendship: they could be doing that in order to extract a favour from us or – which is worse – while they still hate us.

3 While recognising the uniqueness of things and events, the proverbs also admit of their interdependence:

- *Gûtirî ngware îhuragia ta îngî* (Ba114). ('Every patridge has its unique way of scratching the ground.')
- *Gûtirî mûthenya ûkîîaga ta ûngî* (Ba111). ('No day dawns like another.')
- *Ngoro itiumanîrîire ta marima ma huko* (N480). ('Hearts are not linked together like mole's tunnels.')
- *Gûtirî gîtatûirie kîngî* (Ba 98). ('Things are interdependent.')
- *Irî mûrungu îgiritagia îrî kahîa* (Ba175). ('A hornless animal leans on the one that has them.') The first three proverbs are about uniqueness, while the last two are teaching inter-dependence.

4 Whilst some proverbs proclaim that people are free, others show that there is determinism or lack of freedom. The first two proverbs below teach the former and the last two the latter.

- *Ngoro îrîîaga kîrîa yenda* (Ba89). ('The heart eats what it likes.')
- *Kîenjagwo mwene oiga* (N226). ('One chooses when to have a haircut.')
- *Ya kûûra ndîrî mûhîti* (Bel59). ('Somethig destined to be lost cannot be stopped.')
- *Mûndû ûkûûra ndatûnganaga na wa ndûgû* (NR). ('Someone destined to be lost does not meet a relative.') The meaning of the last proverb is that this person's fate is so final as not to be able to meet a close relative who could advise him on the wrong course he is taking.

5 One of the most fundamental principles of metaphsics is that there is no effect without a cause. This principle is taught by the following two proverbs:

- *Gûtirî ndoogo îtarî mwaki* (N103). ('There is no smoke without fire.')
- *Ungîigua yakaya nî nûme* (Ba909). ('If you hear it scream, it is bitten.') It is instructive to notice how this principle is given: from the effect to the cause. This is determined by our mode of knowledge which has its basis in the senses or experience, but which transcends them inductively and reach an intellectual insight or conclusion way beyond the reaches of the senses. Indeed, this method of grasping a concept can be extended to the knowledge of all the other metaphysical themes of Gîkûyû proverbs which have just been studied.

The epistemological content

One finds many Gîkûyû proverbs which make reference to epistemology. As in metaphysics, I shall select only the most representative proverbs in order to illustrate some of the concrete epistemological problems already mentioned.

The meaning of knowledge

Kierkegaard's definition of knowledge (truth) as subjectivity and Popper's talk of 'knowledge without a knowing subject' give the impression that knowledge is monopolar, that is, it is constituted by either the subject or object. This view of knowledge is a minority view. The majority view is that knowledge is bipolar, that is, constituted by a subject becoming what it knows, namely, an object. Gîkûyû epistemological proverbs subscribe to the majority view of knowledge, as we learn from the following proverbs:

- *Gûthiî nî kuona* (Ba91). ('To go is to see.')
- *Gûceera nî kûûhîga* (Ba68). ('Travelling makes one wise.')
- *Mûndû ûtathiiaga athînjaga mwatî* (N381). ('A stay-at-home slaughters a virgin ewe.') The general meaning of the first two proverbs is that 'going is knowing'. In turn, this means that in order to acquire knowledge, a subject must 'leave itself', so to speak, and go to meet another

subject in order to know it precisely as an object. Failure to do so means that one does not acquire knowledge, and remains so ignorant as to perform the sort of act reported in the third proverb. These proverbs, therefore, oppose the monopolar view of knowledge taught by Kierkegaard and Popper.

The answer to the question of how in an act of knowledge the subject becomes what it knows is given by the proverb: *Nda ti mûtwe* (Ba655) ('The stomach is not the head'). This is perhaps the shortest of Gîkûyû proverbs, but it is very significant. Its meaning is that whereas there is a limit as to how much food or drink the stomach can receive, that is not the case with the head or the mind. This connotes that the subject becomes the object immaterially or spiritually. If knowledge took place materially, as in the manner of taking in food, it would be limited to the first thing which enters the eye or the mind. This, however, is refuted by experience. The immaterial mode of knowledge explains, therefore, the great scope of human knowledge.

Empiricism and rationalism

One can reduce theories of knowledge to two basic ones: empiricism and rationalism. Extreme empiricism teaches that knowledge originates from the senses and does not advance beyond them. Moderate empiricism opposes this by allowing sense knowledge to accede to intellectual knowledge. Extreme rationalism (eg Platonism) posits the mind or reason as the originator and developer of knowledge. It denies the senses any role in knowledge. Moderate rationalism, however, accords the senses some role in the acquisition of knowledge. This makes the two moderate positions coincide somewhat.

By far the majority of Gîkûyû proverbs on the origin of knowledge belong to empiricism. They emphasise experience as a condition for knowledge. Obviously, this is possible only through the senses, especially the sense of sight, as shown by the proverbs discussed in the first part above. One can add to these proverbs the following: *Kûmenya werû nî kûûtinda* (N255). ('To spend time in a meadow is to know it.')

There are only two proverbs on rationalism that I have come across:
1 *Uthamaki ndûoyagîrwo igûrû, ûciaragwo na mûndû* (Be490). ('Knowledge of leadership is not picked in the air, one is born with it.')
2 *Kîrîra ti ûkûrû* (N235). ('Wisdom does not necessarily go with age.')
The rationalism of (1) is unmistakeable, going by the very tenet of rationalism, that is, we are born with knowledge. In (2) the teaching of rationalism is rather indirect. Let me explain. If wisdom (knowledge) does not result solely from experience (age), it must have another source: the mind. Going by their proverbs on epistemology, one is led to conclude that the Gîkûyû are moderate empiricists and rationalists, since they accord nearly equal importance to the role of the senses and the intellect (mind).

Knowledge is greatly valued among the Gîkûyû, as we learn from the following proverbs:

- *Uûgî ûkîrîîte hinya* (Ba887). ('Knowledge/wisdom outweigh strength.')
- *Uûgî nî indo* (NR). ('Knowledge/intelligence is wealth.')
- *Uûgî nî kîhooto* (Ba885). ('Intelligence is right.')

On the contrary, foolishmess or stupidity is despised,
as we are told by the two proverbs: *Ng'ombe itionagwo nî ithayo* (Ba818). ('Cows are not acquired by foolish people.') and *Kîongaga nyina akuîte*. ('A foolish baby tries to suckle on its dead mother').

But between praising knowledge and despising foolishness, a meaning is found in the proverb: *Gîtooî ûû, kîûî ûû* (N70) ('The one who does not know this knows that'). This proverb can be interpreted to mean that nobody knows everything, and nobody knows absolutely nothing.

The ethics of Gîkûyû proverbs

Only teleological and metaethical ethics figure in Gîkûyû proverbs, deontological ethics being non-existent. In teleological ethics, we find proverbs covering both individual and social ethics.

Individual ethics proverbs

There are many proverbs in this area. But what is significant, I find, is that most of them are aimed at making an individual gain self-mastery over

(the) mind and body. The aim here is to help an individual acquire internal peace and be in accord with his neighbour, the end result being happiness for all. Two key proverbs on intellectual self-mastery are: *Kûganwo nî kûûra* (Ba299) ('To be praised is to be lost'); and *Itihingagia na mbugi* (N162) ('Not every animal gets a bell'). As for bodily or sensual self-mastery, we have the proverbs: *Kirîrîia, thuti ti ruuo* (Ba294) ('Be patient, a burning desire is not pain'); and *Mûndû ûtarî mbûri ndendaga nyama* (Ba513) ('One who owns no goats does not like meat').

These proverbs, and others like them, are given as a warning to all of us not to entertain evil desires – either intellectual or bodily – lest they lead us to violate the right of another, not to speak of disturbing our peace of mind and making us unhappy. Self-mastery produces a free and ethical individual who in turn can be defined as an individual who has learned to control himself internally and externally by subjecting all his desires to the rule of reason.

Social ethics proverbs

The social ethics proverbs already presuppose the existence of society thanks to the contribution of the teaching of the individual ethics proverbs with their emphasis on self-mastery and self-reliance on the part of the individual. The role of the social ethics proverbs is to provide a teaching which will maintain, advance, and improve – through working and pooling together – the social life for the eventual benefit of individuals. Over and above the individual good which individuals can procure for themselves through self-reliance, there is the common good which can only be obtained through individuals working together in concert.

It is not easy to characterise the common good. Very simply it can be described as the benefit or advantage that individuals derive from the very fact of coming to live together in a society.

This is made imperative because no individual, no matter how self-reliant, is or can be self-sufficient physically, psychologically, morally, or spiritually.

Without ignoring the non-material societal needs, the Gîkûyû lay stress on the need of society for physical support, as we learn from the

following proverbs:

- *Mûgogo ûmwe ndûaraga iriûko* (N332) ('One log does not make a bridge')
- *Njamba îmwe ndîhingaga iriûko* (N488) ('One brave man does not block the ford')
- *Indo nîkûrîmithanio* (Ba169) ('Wealth comes by working together').

From all this it would appear that what facilitates societal life as conceived by the Gîkûyû is good, and what frustrates it is evil. Self-mastery is such a good. Nevertheless, living together is disadvantageous in that: *iti cia hûûra îmwe nî cio ithûraine* (Be180) ('Hyenas of the same lair hate each other'). But another proverb puts a nuance to this view, saying: *Mathanwa me kîondo kîmwe matiagaga gûkomorania* (Ba397) ('Axes in the same basket are bound to knock each other').

Metaethical proverbs

So far, I have been able identify only five metaethical proverbs:

- *Thiirî ûtarîhagwo no wa ûrogi* (N653) ('The only debt which is not paid is the one of poisoning someone')
- *Ngîa îtarî thiirî ti ngîa* (N475) ('A poor person without a debt is not poor')
- *Kûrîha thiirî gûtiîriragwo* (Ba336) ('One does not regret having paid one's debt')
- *Gûthinga gûkîrîîte gûtonga* (Ba541) ('Being virtuous is better than being rich')
- *Gûthinga nî kuo kîhooto* (Ba94) ('Virtue is justice/reason').

The importance of these proverbs lies not so much in what they teach (content), but in the reflective and critical stance they cast on ethical matters. They provide the best example of how proverbs can rise to the second-order discourse. This, according to some thinkers, is what makes a thought philosophical.

Final assessment

E A Ruch has written:

If African philosophy is to reflect African culture, it should not attempt

> to copy the rationalism of the west, but should express itself in the idiom of this culture, in a language which is vibrant with an emotional empathy, permeated with its own tradition and haunted with a sense of mystery and secrecy which are so typically African. The western concern with linguistic analyses, logical craftiness, scientific efficiency and scientific objectivity are neither universally valid (not even for most Europeans), nor are they necessarily the best philosophy. Socrates did not give his life to vouch for the validity of a syllogism, but because he was convinced of a set of values with that pre-rational intuition which alone can make demands on the whole man.

While I agree with many sentiments expressed by Ruch in this quotation (especially his sympathy with African philosophy), I still disagree that this should be something apart from the other world philosophies, especially Western philosophy. This kind of exclusivism should be reserved for culture, not for philosophy. (Even with regard to culture, the more universal its traits or elements, the more acceptable it will be to other cultures.) For me, if a person, of whatever race, is a rational animal, then the battle of philosophy has to be fought on the field of reason in its unqualified sense. What Ruch is putting forward here is African ethnophilosophy, but in a debased sense.

Using Gîkûyû proverbs as an example, I have suggested strongly that African proverbs can function as a source of philosophy in the real sense of the term, a philosophy which is at the same time authentically African. We have shown that some of the Gîkûyû proverbs operate at the level of second-order discourse, meaning that they are reflective and critical of the subject matter they are treating, be it knowledge or ethics. Other proverbs give evidence of being philosophical in the way they refer, albeit implicitly, to the basic philosophical concepts that we have studied above. All this is a refutation of those claims that Africans cannot philosophise, as well as of ethnophilosophy and sage philosophy, both of which mislocate African philosophy.

However, one may still object to the existence of philosophy in Gîkûyû proverbs for two reasons. First, to imply a philosophy is not the same thing to having a philosophy that one can point to. Second, granted that there is such a philosophy, it is communal, not individual. (For philosophy to be

genuine it has to be the work of an individual, as is claimed by some.)

In reply to the first objection, one can say that by far the bulk of philosophical activity consists, not in repeating what an author has said clearly and unambiguously, but in what he has left unsaid or did not clearly express. In the light of this observation, it is quite legitimate for a philosopher to delve into the philosophical implications of proverbs. With regard to the second objection, the first thing to note is that this criterion of philosophy is not universally accepted. However, one can still respond to it by observing that the communal philosophy of the proverbs must have originated from one intelligent individual who was the first to grasp a truth and enunciate it, using that short and pithy linguistic form which we call a proverb. Since what the individual pronounced was true, it came to be accepted by other members of the community. Thus the truth expressed in proverbs became a communal property. There is nothing wrong in this. It is far better for a truth to be shared by many people than to remain the exclusive property of one individual, if that is ever possible.

Conclusion

All African languages – indeed all the languages of the world – abound in proverbs, either in written or unwritten form. Using Gĩkûyû proverbs as a model, African scholars, especially philosophers, are being challenged to bring out the basic philosophy (ontology, epistemology, and ethics) as well as the applied philosophy inherent in the proverbs of their respective languages. The aim of this undertaking is to show that African peoples are not a breed apart, but part and parcel of the larger humankind in whom reason – not emotion – is the main guide of thought and action.

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Proverbs as contested texts: the construction of a philosophy of history from African proverbs

E J Alagoa

Introduction

Modern African philosophers generally agree that an *implicit* philosophy is to be found in African oral traditions, customs, languages, and folklore (Mudimbe 1988: 160–161). Tempels, Griaule and Kagame, among others, have attempted to construct philosophies from these sources or through direct discussions with traditional African philosophers. In this brief paper, I wish to focus on the African proverb as a text that approximates most closely to a philosophical text and, therefore, as a suitable source for the construction of an African philosophy of history.

What properties of the proverb, then, qualify it to be considered a text suitable for the elaboration of philosophical ideas? Proverbs exhibit 'multiple meanings and usages' to a participant according to his/her perception of the situation, and the range of her/his knowledge of proverb lore among other factors (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1973/ Mieder & Dundes 1994:112). Thus, not only do 'contradictory proverbs' exist, but a single proverb may exhibit multiple meanings from its constituting proverb metaphor, or from other sources of ambiguity in the proverb text. In addition, changes in the situations or contexts in which proverbs are used also constitute grounds for changed messages in the meaning of proverbs. These changes in situations and contexts are common in life uses of proverbs, but are not normally taken into account in proverb collections.

Recently, Siran (1993:225) made the assessment of the meanings of proverbs even more problematic by breaking the 'message' conveyed by a proverb into three components:

a its *signification*, being the text that is open to translation into another language

b its *value*, being some sentence that a listener substitutes for the proverb to obtain its meaning in the context of use, and
c its *meaning*, being an element of the text that cannot be translated, but which enables the listener to make the substitution at (b).

Indeed, to Siran (1993:231), proverbs, far from being a source of 'wisdom', a 'system of values' or of 'laws', are, in fact, 'oblique', 'opaque', 'ambiguous', 'folded', 'twisted', and 'knotted' speech whose 'moral connotations' are of 'secondary' significance. Siran supports this position from the Vute (Cameroon) attitude to the proverb as a genre of speech resorted to only by people without the power to say openly and directly what they mean, because they are afraid to offend those to whom their words apply.

These representations of the proverb text as contested serve for me as recommendations of the proverb as a source of implicit philosophies out of which explicit philosophies may be teased. Indeed, in the oral African cultures, proverbs, because of the questions they raise in the minds of participants, already approximate the activities characterised as philosophising in Western cultures. One analysis of proverbs by specialists in speech communication and another by a professional philosopher support my position. First, Goodwin and Wenzel (1979/Mieder & Dundes 1994:140–160) conclude that proverbs in Anglo-American culture 'offer a general set of rational strategies for deliberating about life's problems', and '(1) reflect an implicit typology of patterns of reasoning or argument, (2) illustrate and comment upon legitimate patterns of inference, and (3) caution against general and specific fallacies' (1979/1994:157–158). Second, the Nigerian philosopher Udoidem (1984:128), using Ibibio proverbs as his example, also concluded that proverb use involves 'memory, creativity and knowledge', essential ingredients of any system of knowledge. Udoidem (1984: 132) characterises proverbs as 'impersonal' and 'universal', requiring of the participants the mental functions of 'learning, retaining, recognition and recalling'. The effort to overcome the problems of understanding posed by multiple meanings, ambiguities of metaphor, context, etc., Udoidem characterises as a 'creative response to reality' involving 'intellectual analysis' leading to 'creative understanding' or knowledge (Udoidem 1984:135).

Proverbs and a philosophy of history

In this article I discuss ideas related to historical experience and the practice of history, that is, what African proverbs reveal of traditional thinking concerning knowledge of the past, and the questions that arise in the practical application of traditional thinking in contemporary life situations. These questions include: Who is qualified to tell of the past, and to whom? What are standards for the determination of truth in accounts of the past? What is the value of knowledge of the past? And what are the consequences of ignorance or of neglect of such knowledge?

In a previous article, I broadly related the meaning of an African philosophy of history to the territory already traversed by the Western philosophy of history in the past two to three centuries (Alagoa 1994). Western philosophy of history has moved through a speculative or metaphysical philosophy to an analytical or critical one; from a philosophy concerned with the content and course of historical events and interested in discovering meanings and universal patterns, to one confronting the thoughts and practices of historians (Collingwood 1946). Indeed, the new school of the narrativist philosophy of history places emphasis on the autonomy of the historical text as a metaphor for achieving an understanding of past reality (Ankersmit 1983). In the light of this broad view I recommended that an African philosophy of history include 'what is implicit in institutions, customs, practices, structures and ethnology in general. In particular, it must derive its validity from what is expressed in language, and various oral traditional texts' (Alagoa 1994:15).

In the consideration of proverb texts, a regional approach was adopted, concentrating on the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, with supporting material mainly from West Africa, and some from East Africa. In this article, I am taking an even more restricted view of the region, and concentrate on proverbs from a single community, the Nembe, in the Eastern Niger Delta. Thus I attempt to distil a philosophy of history from the corpus of proverbial wisdom derived from a single African community, even though I must admit that the collection of proverbs from even this restricted area cannot yet claim to be complete and comprehensive.

In form, the Nembe proverb comes in two parts: 'The first part names and the second part makes a statement or draws a moral', the two parts

being 'very beautifully balanced poetically' (Alagoa 1986:i). In its form, then, the Nembe proverb follows the pattern observed by Alan Dundes (1994:50), that 'both proverbs and riddles depend upon "topic comment" constructions'.

I proceed to use the Nembe proverbs that follow to attempt to construct a philosophy of history fully recognising that no proverb produces a complete philosophical proposition, but merely states in a popular form the lesson or moral to be drawn from experience. I do not, therefore, expect the Nembe proverb evidence to reveal 'a definitive philosophy, but popular wisdom, often contradicted (or tempered) by the conclusion derivable from other experience recorded in other proverbs', since 'philosophies ... contend, and life is not smooth and unambiguous' (Alagoa 1986:ii). Accordingly, I use these Nembe proverb texts as documents for the construction of a philosophy of history in harmony with Nembe conceptions of the past and of its practice in society.

Nembe elders and history

Nembe proverb evidence generally ascribe to the elders the privilege of proclaiming on the past:

1 *Noin nengia, / Bere nengia.* 'A difference in age, / Shows in a difference in experience' (Alagoa 1986:76–77).
2 *Okosibo kirigho timite eriye / Togu soutie ka erigha.* 'What an elder sees sitting down / A youth cannot see standing up' (Alagoa 1986:88–89).

Text 1 contains the rationale for placing the elders ahead of youth in the matter of experience or wisdom. The elders have had greater exposure, and a better opportunity to acquire knowledge, wisdom, experience, which should, generally, show in discourse and life situations. Text 2 expresses the same sentiments in more graphic terms, that is, that successful performance in the present is not determined solely by current physical positions of apparent advantage, but more often by possession of past experience. Under such conditions, the elder is placed in a tremendously superior position of vantage in comparison with the youth.

On the other hand, the community is acutely aware of the reality that not all elders had benefited from the opportunity of age to learn to be wise. Accordingly, the privileges accorded to the age of elders are given to all in an indulgent manner whether or not individual elders deserve them. Thus, the Nembe say,

3 *Okosibo ba pumbo / Furugha.* 'An elder's fart / Does not smell bad' (Alagoa 1986:88–9).

The proverb evidence, then, contains scepticism, not just plain naive belief in the wisdom of elders.

The elders, therefore, represent the data bank of community history to be dispensed to the youth for the common good. But should all information be publicised to all and sundry on every possible occasion? Definitely not, according to the following Nembe proverbs:

4 *Kala owoma egberi naa, / Egberi sun.* 'A story known to children / Becomes a foolish story' (Alagoa 1986:60–61).
5 *Owoma kalai timi yogho / Segi furo pugha.* 'A crocodile's stomach / Is not opened before children' (Alagoa 1986:104–105).

Clearly, the telling of history was expected to be done discreetly by knowledgeable elders to responsible adults only. The rationale for this apparent discrimination against youth is implicit – under-aged persons may be liable to trivialise serious matters, and may be corrupted or scandalised by matters beyond their competence to handle. And, indeed, not all adults possess the competence to appreciate the complexities of every issue.

How should we evaluate the truth value of the stories/histories the elders tell? We can consider ideas projected by a number of Nembe proverbs:

6 *Bogo indi / Duba.* 'The escaped fish / Is large' (Alagoa 1986:24–25).
7 *Egberi / Titari gbabo bibi gho bele.* 'A story / Sounds sweet in the mouth of the first teller' (Alagoa 1986:32–33).
8 *Fibo / Buobiri tangiri.* 'The dead / Have thick calves' (Alagoa 1986:36–37).
9 *Fulo bele bogoa / Ala paga.* 'When a soup is too sweet / A saltiness develops' (Alagoa 1986:38–39).

10 *Imeni peibo biobara / Imgba peibo biobaragha.* 'Who eats flesh forgets / Who eats the bones does not' (Alagoa 1986:46–47).
11 *Ite pitabo / Gbori ịfie eki ite pitagha.* 'A fish trapper / Does not set a trap once' (Alagoa 1986:50–51).
12 *Barigha nama / Korogha.* 'An animal does not fall / Without a second shot' (Alagoa 1986:18–19).
13 *Kumbubo fieye / Biotugu.* 'What a short man says / stops at the chest' (Alagoa 1986:64–65).
14 *Egberigbabo / Din mindi gbagha.* 'A storyteller / Does not tell about a different season / tide' (Alagoa 1986:30–31).

What then, does each of these proverbs say about the historian or his/her ability to tell the truth about past events? Text 6 suggests that exaggeration may be expected in an account concerning a good thing missed. The listener is cautioned to take such accounts with a pinch of salt. Similar caution is enjoined by text 7 against the account by the first party to tell the story of an event. Texts 11 and 12 recommend that, in the same manner as a fish trapper sets traps repeatedly, and the hunter shoots twice or more at a target, the historian must seek more than one account of an event. Text 8 states the universal truth that we do not speak ill of the dead. The dead were invariably beautiful, with round, thick calves. Stories in praise of ancestors, therefore, are classified in the category of accounts whose truth value must be considered critically; a cautionary position reinforced by text 9, concerning any story that tastes like an overspiced soup. Text 9 states that the historian should detect an excess of salt in such 'sweet' stories.

Texts 10 and 14 make points about the types of stories that historians tell. According to text 10, historians/the elders remember only cases where they had eaten bones, not when they had eaten the flesh, that is, history remembers evil more than good, war rather than peace, lean years more than years of plenty. In text 14, the influence of the present on accounts of the past is stated in the metaphor of the tides and seasons of the Niger Delta environment. Present seasons, tides and times influence the histories we tell, our selections and determination of what is important and worthy of remembrance and, so, of retelling.

As the teller of history is influenced by factors of nurture, culture and environment, so is the consumer of history. According to text 13, we do not

listen to a 'short man' with care. Just as he can reach only up to chest-level, what a short person tells stops at our chest and does not go down into our bellies, as a credible story should. That is, our evaluation of the truth-value of an account is conditioned in part by our conception of the status of the storyteller/historian. Indeed, historians/storytellers/elders are of at least two kinds. One set appears in the guise of the tortoise, wiser than his mother, claiming the ability to teach his grandmother how to suck eggs:

15 *Ikagi / Nyingi di.* 'Tortoise / Is parent to his mother' (Alagoa 1986:52–53).

The other category of historians is the truly wise, who, like Wisdom itself, had humbled themselves to listen to Foolishness, even claims Foolishness as their parent:

16 *Elegi / Sunpogi yai.* 'Wisdom / Is the son of Foolishness' (Alagoa 1986:34–35).

Third, how do the wise elders develop or acquire their capabilities as credible historians: through heredity, through association with the wise, or by imitation of and learning from the wise? Apparently, historians are made through multiple means:

17 *Bura na mondi indi / Bura bura fure.* 'A fish that moves with the bura fish / Smells of the bura fish' (Alagoa 1986:26–27).
18 *Nama nyingi mondi eteli / Yai ka mondi eteli.* 'The route the mother animal takes / Is the route the baby animal takes' (Alagoa 1986:72–73).
19 *Wan dibo / Bila iregha.* 'A child born of the duiker / Does not name the elephant in parental fondness' (Alagoa 1986:116–117).

Text 17 specifies association as one means of acquiring the characteristics of the associate, through imitation or through sheer habit. Texts 18 and 19 pose the claims of family attraction and, arguably, heredity. But every text contains the necessity of applying choice, discipline, loyalty and deliberate imitation or study or apprenticeship.

Fourth, Nembe proverbs document African conceptions of historical knowledge: its value, and the consequences of ignorance or neglect:
20 *Boyo nimighabo / Nondo.* 'One ignorant of origins / Is of non-human

ancestry' (Alagoa 1981:14).

21 *Ama nimighabo / Dubu ogono*. 'A stranger in town / Walks over hallowed graves' (Alagoa 1986:10–11).

22 *Ma ifie suo obio / Nini pele pele*. 'A second attack of yaws / Destroys the nose' (Alagoa 1986: 166–167).

Texts 15 and 16 defined knowledge as gained through humble listening, even to foolishness, in the course of a life, and achieved at old age. Texts 20–22 extend the discussion. Text 20 refers to the subject of origins to which community traditions assign special significance, indeed, as a synonym for the discipline of history itself. Here, knowledge of origins is stated to be a defining characteristic of the human. To be human is to know where you came from. The consequences of ignorance can be as grave and awful as being deprived of humanity: exclusion from the human community! Historical knowledge, therefore, defines the identity of the individual and the community. African historians have generally been conscious of the relationship between their discipline and the definition of humanity, and so the heat of their reaction to Western colonial historiography, which denied Africa a history.

Text 21 focuses on proper conduct in, and successful integration into, the community. Neglect of historical knowledge places a person in the category of 'stranger', defined as 'one ignorant of town'. Such a person would contravene rules of behaviour, trample over custom and tradition, and violate taboos. It is thus the function of historical knowledge to condition the individual to operate efficiently in the community, and to protect the culture and traditions of the community. Text 22 warns against the failure to learn the lessons of history. Before the eradication of yaws, the parents of a child once infested with yaws were expected to develop the skills and experience to protect the child from a second attack. According to proverb text 22, the consequences of failure to learn from experience were drastic – including loss of parts of the body, such as the nose! The integrity of the individual and the community, therefore, depended in part on learning and applying historical knowledge and experience.

Fifth, we observe from Nembe proverb texts an understanding of the passage of time, and the existence among the people of a sense of duration – two essential elements in the craft of the historian:

23 *Aru kara kirigho / Aru berigha.* 'A canoe is not fully shaped / At the spot it is first carved' (Alagoa 1986:12–13).
24 *Nama ba kirigho / Nama kenigha.* 'Where an animal is killed / Is not where it is butchered' (Alagoa 1986:72–73).
25 *Kiri paga tere / Tïn paga.* 'The earth came into being / Before the trees' (Alagoa 1986:62–63).
26 *Borobu ebi re / Ye.* 'Evening glory / Is best' (Alagoa 1986:24–25).

From text 14 we recognise that concepts of seasons and tides established a sense of the ebb and flow of time, and of the organic relationship between past, present and future. Texts 23–26 above utilise different images to define the characteristically relative view of the chronology of African oral historiography. In this view of chronology, events are set one in relation to the other: one event is placed before or after another. Thus, texts 23 and 24 state that a canoe is made over time and space through stages and moved from one place to another. Similarly, a hunter moves his prey from the time and place of kill to a time and place for the disposal of the meat. Text 25 penetrates the grounds of historical time and origins in which reality is constituted of time and space relationships which are established and determined, that is, that things in nature, as in history, have their place one in relation to the other, in time and space.

Text 26 does duty for a number of Nembe proverbs which reflect on the relative advantages and disadvantages of differing fortunes in life: early prosperity or a life fulfilled in great old age. Text 26 and other texts give the palm to prosperity at the end or evening of a life of purposive effort.

Sixth, there are proverb texts capable of being interpreted in the light of the early Christian ideas of the primacy of providence, destiny, and of predestination:

27 *Ayiba bibi pu woriobo / Womoun bagha.* 'One with a mouth shaped by God / Does not die of hunger' (Alagoa 1986:14–15).
28 *Ayiba otumo fa ovin gho / Omombu de.* 'God drives flies off / The cow without a tail' (Alagoa 1986:14–15).
29 *Ikoli tamuno / Ikoli firimo mu igbo gho suo.* 'Crab's destiny / Sent Crab into a net' (Alagoa 1986:54–55).
30 *Ye firimogha indi / Igbo gho suogha.* 'A fish not sent by destiny / Does not get entrapped in a net' (Alagoa 1986:120–121).

Why do things happen to whom and when they happen? These proverbs would suggest: things happen as ordained by God and according to the destiny received by the individual soul (*tamuno*) from God prior to birth; and God provides for his creatures.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this brief discussion of a philosophy of history derived from Nembe proverbs remains tentative, since the range of interpretations to which each proverb is subject has not been exhausted. The subject of my discourse, therefore, remains open and contestable.

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The dynamics of the African proverb with special reference to the Xhosa proverb

T N Ntshinga

Introduction

African proverbs have been widely collected and studied by foreign and African scholars. Unfortunately the value of most of the collections has suffered severely from a poor understanding of the cultural and aesthetic backgrounds of the proverbs. It is the purpose of this article to examine proverb variants so as to illustrate the thesis that folklore scholarship is based almost entirely on the study of variation. This is in line with Mieder's concern (1987:x) that 'very little attention if any was paid to the invitation process that has always been part of any tradition no matter how small changes might be'.

This article discusses the multimedia dimension and structural dynamics of the proverb to demonstrate that the proverb as a genre of oral literature is fluid and flexible. The capability of the proverb to fly from one medium of communication and transmission to another illustrates the processes and forces of what Toelken (1979) calls 'conservation' and 'dynamism' which are regarded in this article as same as what Dorson (1978) calls 'traditional' and 'revised' concepts. The ability of proverb users to recreate the proverb during performance has received very little attention from scholars. For this reason this study focuses mainly on the mode and medium of proverb transmission.

Theoretical perspective

In his discussion of the term 'folk' Dorson (1978) suggests that the concept need not apply exclusively to country folk, but signifies anonymous masses of tradition-oriented people. He argues that if country folk move to the city, they do not thereby forfeit the interest of the folklorist. Nor do generations born within city limits necessarily fail to qualify as folk groups, for their lives too may be shaped by traditional codes of

behaviour, expression, dress, worldview and the like. Also recognising the presence of traditional culture in contemporary sociocultural development, Rithman-August (1978) in his study of *Traditional culture, folklore and mass culture in contemporary Yugoslavia* notes that although culture is conceived as a product of historical events, the process of adaptation of yesterday's cultural patterns to those of today and tomorrow, as well as adaptation of present culture to historical patterns, is included in the process. Finnegan (1970) supports the contemporaneity of oral tradition by stating that processes and genres of oral literature are dynamic as well as conservative. Toelken (1979:35) maintains that:

> Conservatism refers to all those processes and forces that result in the retaining of certain information, beliefs, styles, customs and the like, and the attempted passing of those materials, intact through time and space in all channels of traditional expressions.

He refers to *dynamism* on the other hand as comprising:

> ... all those elements that function to change features, contents, meanings, styles, performance, and usage as a particular traditional event takes place repeatedly through space and time *(Ibid)*.

In the same sense Dorson, in his discussion of perception of folklore, refers to 'the traditional concept' and 'the revised concept'. By traditional concept he refers to the conception of folklore as 'bygones, popular antiquities, survivals' (1978:11). He also suggests that this notion was coupled with such terms as superstitions, illiterate, backward, primitive. In a nobler light another set of terms such as simple, unspoiled, close to nature, has emerged.

The 'revised' concept, on the other hand,

> ... depicts folklore studies in quite a different light, presents them as contemporary, keyed to the here and now, to urban centres, to the industrial revolution, to the issues and philosophies of the day. In this conception folklore is where the action is not in some idyllic backwater (1978:23).

The notion of conservative/traditional concept emphasises and encourages static features of some genres while dynamism/the revised concept

emphasises dynamic characteristics. In a discussion of the social relevance of African oral literature, Isidore Okpewho (1992) is quick to notice that oral literature serves members of the society by making it possible for them to come to terms with the world in which they live. He establishes that oral literature provides a much wider service by giving the society – whether isolated groups within it or the citizenry as a whole – a collective sense of who they are and helping them define or comprehend the world at large in terms that are familiar to them. He further explains (1992:110):

> ... every society or community of people makes an effort to explain certain aspects of nature or the universe in which they live. Such an explanation frequently comes in the form of a story that sounds reasonably original to the society and its natural environment, but should the idea for the explanation come from the outside by some process of diffusion, the society will reformulate it in a manner and with idioms that are native to their language and their culture.

The reformulation, redirection and extension of foreign ideas can be seen as ways and means in which a society seeks to safeguard its interests and thus establish securely an identity which it can cherish for a long time in what Okpewho calls the 'face of the vicissitudes of history'.

The works of other scholars such as Caraveli, Bauman, Joyner, Mieder and Iyasere also support Toelken and Dorson's dynamic concept of oral literature. Mvula (1994) maintains that since culture represents an ongoing process, the relation of folklore genres to their cultural background is equally dynamic. He further contends (1994:2):

> The items that can be called folklore in the mass media are products of human behaviour and creativity in response to traditional and contemporary issues.

The point made by Mvula is that contemporary folklore performers employ traditional concepts of folklore, but modify them according to the functional and aesthetic needs of the audience. It is in the light of this theoretical perspective that this article discusses the way in which proverb users revitalise and rework their proverbs for modern application.

Media of proverb communication

One dynamic characteristic of the proverb is the variety of ways in which it can be communicated. Finnegan (1970), for example, observes that among the Fante of West Africa proverbs are drummed, and among the Ashanti they are associated with gold weights. In his study of the Akan proverb Kwesi Yankah (1989) also illustrates the multimedia dimension of the African proverb with particular reference to the cloth names in Ghana, which, he says, range from simple Akan phrases to proverb names. He further observes that the proverb in Africa is not restricted to the oral medium of communication and asserts that proverbs may be communicated through drum, hairstyle, umbrella tops and ornamentation.

The Xhosa proverb

The Xhosa proverb bears the same multimedia characteristic as other African proverbs. It is transmitted orally and in graphic form. It is noticeable that industrialisation and urbanisation are factors worth considering in the discussion of the Xhosa proverbs. With the independence of the previous Transkei (now Eastern Cape), in 1976 Xhosas had the opportunity of doing business in both urban and rural areas, the most common of these being shops and taxi businesses. A taxi in the Lusikisiki town of Pondoland is painted with the proverbial phrase: *Lihlab'elimzondayo* from the proverb: *Ithambo lenyoka lihlab'elimzondayo* ('The bone of a snake pricks the one it hates'). Another taxi in Umtata is sprayed *Idla ngamabala* from the proverb: *Ingwe idla ngamabala* ('The leopard eats by means of its spots'). This proverb means that if one wants preference, one must have features which distinguish one from others. On inquiring about the choice of proverbs on the taxis, it came to light that two rival groups are competing for business in the area, one being Sabta (South African Black Taxi Association) and the other one NCEDO (literally meaning 'help'). If taxis belonging to one association seem to be favoured by commuters, the other group must improve its services to attract more commuters. The proverb is therefore used to sting an opponent.

The advertising industry also appeals to tradition for effective communication. The advertising community, for example, employs traditional

concepts of folklore, but modifies the product according to the function and aesthetic needs of its audience, the consumers. A grocery wholesaler in Butterworth is advertised on Radio Transkei with the proverb: *Evuka mva ikholwa zizagweba* ('The partridge that flies up last gets the stick'), meaning: 'Don't be lethargic.' This is intended to influence customers to rush to buy while stock on sale lasts.

Grassroots development projects are given proverbial names, as is the case with an agricultural development project in the Mt Frere area of the Eastern Cape. The name of the project, *Isinamva,* is taken from the proverb *Isinamva liyabukwa* ('He/she who dances last gets all the attention'). The community was the last in the area to be considered for a development project, and the name has been found suitable to encourage the support of the project. People have seen how other community projects failed, and are set to improve on the mistakes of the others to make theirs a success.

Proverbs are often used for effective communication in sermons. The following are commonly used at funerals:

Isitya esihle asidleli ('A nice vessel is not eaten out of'). This is the most popular proverb and is used to refer to a person who is popular because of his/her good deeds. He/she dies all too soon in the eyes of the people he/she has been serving.

Kugawulwa owaziwayo ('The one [tree] which is known, is cut'). God knows which person is best suited for heaven.

Alitshoni lingaphumi ('The sun does not set forever, it rises again') This is used to comfort the bereaved.

Intertextuality is another area to be explored in the study of proverbs. Julien (1992) explains intertextuality as a continuous dialogue of works of literature among themselves. This means that texts comment and expand upon their predecessors. Far from being a closed unit each text is an absorption and transformation of a multitude of other texts. The exchanges, allusions, and self-references that are always taken for granted among written texts exist across modes of language and narrative art as well. Proverbs should, therefore, be researched within other genres, for example songs, stories, riddles, poetry and nicknames in particular.

It is interesting to note the nature of proverbs in their new environment, and the capability of the people to manipulate new challenges by adapting even their language to new social conditions, which brings us to the last part of this paper.

Structural dynamics

Maja Boskovic Stulli (1980) says:

> Proverbs and proverbial phrases in the newspaper are intentionally distinguished from their traditional, folkloric models. They are modified, and appear in variant forms.

The transformation process proverbs undergo is interesting, and the transformations are manifold. The form of the proverb is often changed. A proverb may be alluded to in just one word as in the following example extracted from Mda's *Ntengu ntengu Macetyana* (1968:87): *Kodwa esaa sityebamva singumnakwabo silumke okwentwala yesikhaka* ('But that brother of his with "new money" is as cunning as a louse'). The complete proverb is: *Isityebamva sinqol'intaba* ('The newly rich distances him/herself, ie does not want to help others').

Sometimes a proverb may be elliptically contracted as illustrated by the following example from Vapi's *Litshona liphume* (1989:34): *Ke ntombam hlala usazi ukuba Imizi ayifani* ('So my daughter always remember that homes have different practices'). Here the last part of the proverb is left out. The complete proverb should read: *Imizi ayifani ifana ngeentlanti zodwa* ('Homes differ, they only have one thing in common, such as kraals').

Occasionally the proverb is expanded in accordance with the new context as in the following example: *Ungaqali ngokwandlal ibhedi indoda ingekafiki* ('You must not rush to lay *the bed* before the man comes'). The words 'the bed' are added to the original proverb for emphasis and to suit the new context (as beds were not commonly used in traditional homesteads). The proverb in its traditional form is: *Ungagali ngokwandlala indoda ingekafiki.*

Elements of the proverbs may also be altered by replacing the traditional constituents with notions from contemporary social and political vocabulary: *Icomrade liyayizala impimpi* ('A political activist can give birth to an informer'). Here the word *Umthathi* (a kind of tree) is replaced by the word 'comrade' and *umlotha* (ash) by 'informer'. In its traditional form the proverb reads: *Umthathi uyawuzala umlotha* ('A strong tree produces ashes too').

Sometimes a proverb statement may be transformed to a question as in the following example: *Wakha waziva phi iinkunzi zikhonya ebuhlantimni obunye?* ('Where have you ever heard bulls bellowing in one kraal?'). The basic form of the proverb is: *Akukho nkunzi zikhonya buhlantimi bunye* ('There are no bulls that bellow in the same kraal'). The original negation ('there are no') is transformed into a question, a rhetorical, sarcastic question whose answer is conventional knowledge and automatically negative.

There are many more strategic modes of proverb performance that are not discussed in this paper because of time constraints, such as omission, modification and use of the pre-proverb formula, stylised elaboration of a proverb image or metaphor at the end of a proverb, personalisation of impersonal form and dynamics of proverb meaning.

Conclusion

The proverb in Africa is both conservative and dynamic. It manifests itself in various contexts, traditional and modern, and it is transmitted through a large variety of media. Proverbs use language and language changes in response to social, political, economic and religious challenges. Proverb users exhibit skills in proverb re-creation. They delete, elaborate, and transpose elements in the proverb. They are aware that proverbs have to be meaningful and relevant to contemporary experience. In my opinion these are some of the issues that students of the African proverb in the twenty-first century should take into consideration.

Okungapheliyo kuyahlola ('That which does not end predicts misfortune').

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PART II

Proverbs and structures and institutions of society

Proverbs as pillars of social structure: a case study of Kaguru proverbs

Jesca S Mkuchu

Introduction

This article discusses how proverbs in the context of Kaguru society are used as pillars in the enculturation of its social structure. It starts by explaining the meaning of key concepts as they are being used in this article. One of the definitions that has been given prominence is *proverb*. This is done to demarcate two types of proverbs. There are proverbs used in ordinary/everyday life situations and those used specifically in initiation rites. The former type of proverbs are known as *mbasi* while the latter are known as *misimu*. The author then dwells on the general and specific objectives of proverbs as they are used in different situations/contexts. Examples of proverbs are given to show how they are being used in different contexts, which will include proverbs as they are used in resolving conflicts (legal matters), paying of dowry, and initiation rites. By contextualising the proverbs, the article shows how proverbs are used to socialise the members of the Kaguru society to what behaviour is expected of them in different situations.

The examples cited show how proverbs are used as pillars of imparting cultural norms and values. This transmission of culture aims at ensuring cultural cohesiveness within the Kaguru culture. Before concluding the article by giving a critique on how proverbs are coping with changes that are taking place in the society and making recommendations, some Kaguru proverbs are listed according to theme with the brief meaning of each proverb.

Definition of key concepts

To contextualisse the meaning of key concepts as they have been used in this article, the definitions of *proverb*, *socialisation*, *culture*, and *enculturation* are given.

Proverb: A brief saying that presents a truth or some bit of useful wisdom. In a proverb the literal words say something, but there is a different meaning behind them. It is the hidden meaning which is important. A proverb thus requires interpretation. It is in this respect that the users of Kaguru proverbs are cautioned to make sure that whenever they use proverbs, they should be able to give their interpretation. The proverb to this effect is *mtoa mbasi na ulawilo* ('One who gives a proverb should be able to interpret it correctly').

It should be noted however, that as one reviews related literature on proverbs, one finds that different authors such as Ruth Finnegan (1990), Kuneene wa Mutiso (1991) and many others indicate that there is no universally acceptable definition of a proverb.

Socialisation: This refers to how people learn or acquire norms, traditions and values in a specific society. Through the socialisation process individuals are assisted to understand what is expected of them. In different situations individuals are socialised through the communication media. Proverbs in a language play a big role in this socialisation process.

Culture: Culture refers to behaviour learned as a result of living in groups which tend to be patterned and this is transmitted from generation to generation. Proverbs used in different settings have been used as one of the mediums for transmitting the Kaguru culture from one generation to another.

Enculturation: This is the process of learning the culture of one's group. Through different settings such as places where conflicts/cases are being resolved, dowry being negotiated and paid in initiation ceremonies, proverbs are used as means of enculturation of individuals to their culture.

Functions of proverbs

Proverbs in Kaguru society, as in other societies, have the broader goal of cultivating in the members of the community the ability to appreciate and conform to the social values, norms and beliefs of that community. Proverbs are thus used to enable members to perform their roles responsibly in conformity with societal values and norms, to transmit cultural values.

Proverbs thus are used to advise and rebuke. In proverbs a whole range of human experiences can be commented on and analysed, depending on the situation in which the proverbs are used.

Proverbs can be used in formal or informal settings. Informal situations may be ordinary day-to-day conversations to advise, rebuke and instruct. Proverbs can also be used in formal gatherings or special occasions. Such gatherings can be a ceremony to mark the end of a period of mourning, a meeting called to smooth over a disagreement/conflict, or the payment of dowry and initiation rites. To illustrate how the proverbs are used in the Kaguru context, four settings will be sketched. The contexts depicted are related to resolving conflicts, the paying of dowry, mourning situations and initiation ceremonies. More examples of proverbs under different themes are attached in appendix A.

Settling a conflict

Proverbs are used in discussions aimed at resolving conflicts or smoothing over a disagreement or a court case. Such gatherings take place under the leadership of counsellors, who are usually elders experienced in using proverbs. In handling such cases, the elders attempt to show that the issue being discussed is not unique and has cropped up before. To explain how a similar case was resolved, the elder would state, *Simbuli sina mke miyagwe*, meaning cases/issues are like co-wives, they are similar yet different.

A second important requirement is fairness to all involved. People involved in the case are given the opportunity to defend/explain their side. However, if somebody lies and it is proven beyond doubt in the procedure of the discussion that he/she is a liar, a warning is usually issued to the liar and all those present that telling lies is not acceptable. The proverb which is generally used here is *Udasi chibwa chijelu chikwandamila imutwae* ('Lies are like a small white dog; it always follows the master'). Another proverb used in this situation states: *Mhogo mwana mlondwa koikwingilila noko ikulawila* ('A bangle will come off the arm in the same way that it went on').

It sometimes happens that an unfair judgment is given in a case where the real culprit is not punished, and an innocent person is punished instead.

People would indicate this unfairness by stating: *Injuki ileka kuluma imudii, ikuluma imuhanuli* ('The bees have not stung the honey eater, but someone who has not eaten it'). Sometimes the unfair judgment will be explained by the fact that the victim was associating with wrongdoers, hence the consequences. In giving advice to people to avoid such situations, it could be stated: *Unghandamila msoloka kundu nagwe ukusoloka kundu* ('If you associate with a person whose anus has been exposed, your anus will also be exposed').

Counsellors do not like to postpone a case or conflict unless this is absolutely necessary. There is fear that people involved in the case might destroy or tamper with the evidence gathered previously. For them it is preferable to pass judgment on the same day rather than postpone a case. They say: *Kambaku dya ng'ombe mlutope* ('The bull should be killed when it is stuck in the mud'). Another proverb reinforcing the idea that judgment should be passed on the same day or else the judgment might be spoilt is *Msale ugonile mbago ulota* ('An arrow that has been shot and is in the bush will lose its strength').

Proverbs used in dowry cases

Arranging a marriage is a very important social institution for the Wakaguru. It is through marriage that clans are united to form close relationships, or the expansion of the two clans is achieved through reproduction. Before a marriage is sanctioned, however, the dowry has to be paid by the proposed husband's clan. It is very important that the full dowry is paid. To ensure fair bargaining during the dowry setting it is important that the representatives of both sides who are sent to conduct the negotiations have to be convincing. Those who are good at using proverbs are preferred, as the use of proverbs can be decisive in this situation.

On the appointed day, the representatives of the young man who wants to get married would go to the girl's parents to present their case. The relatives of the girl would state the dowry that they expected to be paid. The stated amount is usually higher than is eventually paid. The husband's relatives will respond that they have very little money, and know the girl's relatives are rich. The girl's representatives will respond that the amount of the dowry was set in the knowledge of the worthiness/wealth of the other

side. They would quote a proverb ending with the question: *Segela segela somgonanye*? ('Can you tell someone who is not sleeping with you in the same bed to move to the other side of the bed?'). The other side would retaliate that what the girl's relatives see is not the proposed husband's wealth, but that of the clan or the neighbours whose animals are in the same boma. They would support their argument with a proverb which states: *Ichikuku ichali chuwile mwikolowa dyako* ('If a small chick belongs to you, it should be under the custody of your grown-up hen', meaning that it is not possible for an outsider to know the extent of another's wealth). The dialogue can continue for quite some time. In the knowledge that when marriage takes place, a mutually beneficial relationship will be started, the bride price will be reduced. A representative of the girl's side may say, *Magongolo mamanyi gakigoweka sisingo* ('Millepedes that know each other coil their necks around each other').

It should be noted that not all dowry negotiations end amicably. Quarrels can arise, in which case the girl's representatives might even resort to ridicule, using a proverb such as: *Goukujumha dikolongo uditamile dipenghene* ('When you decide to make a long jump it is better to inform the hip'). This implies that the boy's relatives (being poor as they are) should have investigated their ability to marry a girl from a richer clan.

Proverbs used in mourning

It is customary to visit a family where one of the members has died. It is very important when expressing condolences to be careful in communicating with those affected by death, lest the visitor/sympathiser causes more grief to the mourning people. The cause of the death might be explained by giving a proverb such as: *Witeke witika hata unghaunega usikumema mwiganja* ('Flour that has fallen on the ground, even when collected, will not fill a handful'). The visitor in sympathising with the relatives of the deceased would reply with a proverb: *Nonheifo seja senda muwanhu salema mumabiki* ('That is how things go; they refused to be with trees and like to be with people').

Related to mourning is the issue of inheritance. A day is always set to end the mourning, when the inheritance is distributed among the relatives.

In the Kaguru culture property inheritance is not only for the sons but also for the sons of the sister of the deceased (nephews). If complaints are raised on the unfairness of the distribution of the inheritance, with the argument that a bigger share should be given to those (the sons and wife) who toiled in producing that wealth, elders would say that this is not necessarily the case. The proverb goes: *Musiku wa chua ukudiigwa no nghausongole* ('The honey from a strong beehive is not eaten by the one who made the beehive'). A warning may be issued, however, to those who inherit the property of the deceased (including the wife) that they should take care of those who were under the custody of the deceased for there is a tendency to abandon the shouldering of responsibilities which have no direct benefits. The proverb says: *Muhala chali kahalaga isambo na mabiho* ('The one who inherits a child is also required to inherit a piece of cloth [used to carry a baby] and leaves' [used as toilet paper]).

Proverbs used in initiation rites

Proverbs are very often used in initiation rites in Kaguru society. According to Mlama (1984) it is customary for Kaguru boys and girls to undergo initiation rites as they reach a certain age. These rites aim at socialising both boys and girls into what is required of them as they enter adulthood. The process is done formally, with the characteristics of formal education applying. There are teachers/guardians known as Wahunga. The Wahunga are responsible for the teaching, generally by the use of proverbs. Proverbs used in initiation rites are known as *figonho* in contrast with ordinary proverbs known as *mbasi*. *Figonho* in initiation rites frequently appear as songs and have some of the characteristics of a poem. The poetic style of *figonho* makes the teaching process easier. The interpretation of these proverbs is called *misimu*. By and large *misimu* are related to reproduction and the general morals of society.

Proverbs have to be memorised in the first two weeks before the interpretations are given. The songs and the accompanying proverbs are taught and the interpretations given at a lodge situated a distance from the homes to ensure confidentiality or secrecy. Only those who have passed this stage of initiation are allowed to hear what is taught.

As a means of preparing adolescents for adulthood and parenthood, proverbs related to reproduction are taught. Here the importance of the sex act and reproduction is given as one of the pillars of Kaguru society. The following proverbs relate to reproduction:

Dimachikolobwe dyengila chisina, dyasa kulawa ding'hunhule meso ('Dimachikolobwe [a child's name] enters the house blindly but she comes out with eyes wide open'). This means the origin of a pregnancy is a small object, but the outcome is a human being born with 'big eyes'.

Nheme ludete nilokele mhwani, mhwani muwaha ng'holokaga bwete ('I must use the bamboo pole to cross the river to the other bank for there is no other way'). The meaning of this proverb is that pregnancy is only possible through sexual intercourse.

Some proverbs also teach would-be husbands how they are required to relate to their wives. The following examples are proverbs related to male responsibility:

Mtati hembe dya mbogo ('A buffalo's horn is the buffalo's own possession'). This means the husband must treat his wife as part of his own body.

Mpiga mbogo, piga ulengele, meso ga mbogo, gali kumgongo ('When shooting a buffalo, make sure you shoot with care as the eyes of the buffalo are at the back'). This proverb means that the husband has to be careful in administering punishment to a pregnant wife lest he destroys the pregnancy.

Kolo dya baba fuga fuga ng'ende, dyufe munzila muhinji nani? ('If my father's sheep goes on a journey and it dies on the way, who will skin it?'). A husband is cautioned not to take his pregnant wife (in an advanced stage of pregnancy) on a long journey because if she delivers on the way, the husband will not know what to do.

Nyende nyendage mu nghingi yo uwami, nhegelesage uwami cho ulonga ('Let me wander along the banks of Wami river and listen to what the river has to say'). This proverb means the husband has the responsibility of being around when his wife is about to deliver a baby. He has to wait for the outcome.

Some proverbs are meant to instil morals in adolescents during initiation rites. While a boy, for example, is taught and even encouraged to have sex with older women, he is prohibited from marrying a close relative. The proverb that encourages a boy to have sex with even older women is: *Dipela diya iwaha bwete, hamba mdodo koditowa nyinyi* ('Even if that baobab tree is very big, a young person can destroy it'). The proverb that prohibits sex with relatives is: *Umpululuji muti wa mulwanda, nha unoge muno hautemwa jengo* ('Mpululuji, the tree of the river, no matter how suitable, it cannot be used for building a house').

Another proverb teaches children not to go into the rooms of their parents or other married people early in the morning, for they may find them making love. The proverb is: *Wadodo nyenye, mpelage kwilawa, mwalakwagana mphela mkayembe, sali kihoma, sali kisajanga, sali kilajila na madughu yayo, madughu gachi madughu ge mbata* ('Children, you must stop the habit of waking early. You will find rhinos fighting each other with their horns').

Conclusion

Judging from the material presented in this article, one can conclude that proverbs have been, and still are, useful in transmitting Kaguru culture in different settings. Proverbs used in day-to-day encounter and proverbs used in initiation rites all aim at enculturating people in such situations as relationship building with other people, the importance of work, resolving conflicts, proper childrearing, responsible parenthood, the importance of married life, and cooperation. All these form the base of the social structure of the Kaguru.

A quick survey to evaluate the prevalence and use of these proverbs properly raises several issues. Up to now Kaguru proverbs have not been systematically collected and documented. A survey in libraries in Tanzania shows that apart from the proverbs quoted by Mlama (1973 and 1983) there are no other documents on Kaguru proverbs. There is a reference in the *Journal of Research in African Literature* (26 (1)) that Busse Joseph (1936-1937) made a collection of Kaguru proverbs, but the collection cannot be

traced in libraries in Tanzania. It is probably written in German, which offers a serious handicap to Tanzanian readers.

When one attends functions that involve the use of Kaguru proverbs, such as the conclusion of mourning ceremonies, one finds that only elderly people are conversant with the precise use of these proverbs. The middle-aged and younger generations are not so fluent in using proverbs. There is a likelihood that only an insignificant number of the Kaguru population may still be able to use proverbs in the near future.

The interpretation of proverbs relates to the prevailing situations and the context under which the proverb at hand is used. With the first category of Kaguru proverbs (*mbasi*), one finds that the interpretation could change with time by contextualising the proverb. Sometimes, however, the literal meaning of a proverb cannot make sense to a new generation. There is a substantial number of Kaguru youth who do not pass the initiation rites and the accompanying training in the use of proverbs (*figonho* and *misimu*). This gap is not unique to Kaguru society but occurs in many other ethnic groups in Tanzania where initiation rites were carried out in the past. As a result of this a vacuum has been created.

This problem has been noted by the Ministry of Education, resulting in their starting studies in family life education in schools and teachers' colleges (Ministry of Education 1986). Reproduction is one of the themes that is taught in family life education. However, it is taught in only a few schools as it is still in the pilot stage. A proper evaluation of the sucess of these initiatives can therefore only take place in future.

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Proverbs and philosophy of education in the Mossi culture: some implications

Gérémie Sawadogo

Introduction

The relationship between language and worldview has been the subject of several studies which attempted to demonstrate that a culture transmits its beliefs, thought and worldview through language (Barlund 1993; Fantini 1992; Porter & Samovar 1991; and Ferguson 1980). As Fantini (1992:14) writes: 'Language and, therefore, communicative competence (our expanded definition of language) reflects and reinforces a particular view we hold.' Although these studies concerned only Western languages, similar conclusions were reached by Africanists in their studies of the importance and power of language and the word among Africans (Jahn 1961; Zahan 1963; Dieterlen 1965; Griaule 1966; Gassama 1978). Though one might already assume that language would have a certain importance in oral cultures, the studies provided an African perspective on words and language.

For instance, the German Africanist Janheinz Jahn identifies four main components in the African cosmogony: *Muntu*, humankind; *Kintu*, things; *Hantu*, place and time; and *Kuntu*, modality. As Weber describes it, these four elements do not exist as static objects but as forces that have consequences and influence. Muntu or human being is distinguished from the other three elements by the possession of *Nommo,* the magical power of the word. Without *Nommo,* nothing exists (Weber 1991:278). Evidence of the importance given to the word in African societies is still found in rituals that involve teeth filing and mouth washing in certain contexts to protect one's words, also referred to as 'seeds of God' (Zahan 1965). As a Bambara proverb goes: 'Man does not have a mane or a tail but you can get to him through his word.'

The importance of language in defining a society's worldview in Africa stems from the importance accorded words. In Mossi society,[1] as in most

African cultures, words have their own life, power and physical shape. For an example of the physical shape of words, in Moore, one would say: *Maneg f goama* ('Re-arrange your words'). Or *A goama koom pa nere* ('Your words don't have a pretty shape'). Or *Yaa gom viido* ('It's just empty words'). Words can also be powerful and frightening because it is believed that words have the power to create living entities. Thus, one is not encouraged (often forbidden) to name certain phenomena such as death and other natural beings such as snakes, certain ghosts and spirits believed to be dangerous to human beings. In such cases, silence becomes valued as an intricate part of language.

However, if language provides an indication of a society's thought pattern, then proverbs (among all other language genres) best crystallise the worldview of that culture. As a Yoruba proverb asserts: 'A proverb is the horse of language. When language is lost it is found thanks to the proverb.' Thus, proverbs represent universal truth; they are never debated or modified because they represent traditions. In the Mossi culture, proverbs are used to settle disputes, educate children and generally express the worldview of a given culture because they contain universal truths that are not disputed but are part of common knowledge (Richmond & Courlander 1975). According to Morain (1973:80), who writes on the educational value of African proverbs, they provide 'excellent guideposts to the study of social psychology, history, and traditional attitudes'.

This study[2] seeks to use the corpus of proverbs below[3] to discuss the Mossi philosophy of education, after which there will be a discussion on the implications for local and international development endeavours. Each proverb is first introduced in Moore, followed by a literal translation. The third line represents a free translation of the proverb.

Proverbs

1 *Bi song / yaa/ned faal/ biiga; Bi yoog/ yaa/ a zagl biiga/*
'Good child/is/everyone/child Bad child/is/somebody else's child'
A good child is everyone's child. A bad child belongs to somebody else.

2 *Pa/ kwe zenkre/ la biig gulg ye; biig/ rikda/ banem banem*
'Not/loud voice/raise child Child/is taken/slowly slowly'
A loud voice does not raise a child. Raising a child is to be done gently.

3 *A /pa mi gjeneg ye; /denda /tus n lubi*
'She/he know not stare/only/push down'
Only push and shove can influence him, not stares.

4 *Eb / wuba / fo/ wa eb/ na ti koos/ a rage*
'One/raised/you/as if/to be sold/in the market'
You were raised to be sold in the market.

5 *Eb / wuba / fo / ne biskas la?*
'One/raised/you/with bran?'
Were you raised on bran?

6 *Fo / pa ya / wubr ye*
'You/did not see/raising'
You did not see any (effective) upbringing

7 *Roag / remsdame ti /a kjet n yaa /maasre*
'Wood/strengthen out/while it is still/wet'
Mould the wood while it is still green.

8 *A /na bii n yii /neere,/ song n /dog /ne /f neere*
'Grow and be/good/better be/born/with/goodness'
To grow and be good is better than to be born with goodness.

9 *F /sa kii /ne buuga/ f nitam / sata /raage*
'If/you related/to a goat/tears/finish/market'
If you are related to a goat, you will cry out your tears in a market.

10 *Nisaal yoog /bangda /a gwame*
'Person/bad/recognized/by talks'
You can tell a bad person by the way he/she talks.

11 *F sa ku / f yalma, / f to yalm /n kuud fo*
'If/you/kill/your silly/someone else/silly will kill you'
Don't kill your silly child because somebody else's silly child will kill you.

12 *A zagl / biiga / yaa bi /yaare*
'Someone's/kid/is child/no scruples'
This child does not have any scruples.

13 *Boang /me rogdame / ti a poor / na vuuse*
'Donkey/gives birth/so its back/can rest'
A donkey gives birth so its back can rest.

14 *Na bi /n manegba / baasda / zug weko*
'Will grow/and be good/ends/up unshaped head'
Good behaviour is obtained at a young age.

15 *Bi song / zinkda / a / saambramb / zug/*
'Children/rise/family/head'
Children confer glory on their parents.

16 *Sokre / la / bangre/*
'Questions/equal/knowledge'
He or she who wants knowledge must ask questions.

17 *Pu/ mi / pa yand ye*
'Not/know/not shame'
Lack of knowledge is no shame.

18 *Yam / dikta/ to nenge*
'Intelligence/take/with another person'
One always learns from someone else.

19 *Minem/ sao / panga*
'Knowledge/better/physical power'
It is better to have knowledge than physical power.

20 *Nikiem/ song/ yaa/ tiim*
'Old person/good/is/medicine'
An old (good) person is like medicine.

A philosophy of education

From this set of proverbs it appears that the final aim of education is to train human beings so as to differentiate them from animals. Thus, a human being who has not received social education as defined in the Mossi

culture is comparable to an animal, in particular the goat which is also the symbol of silliness (see proverbs 6 and 9). This proverb also points to the challenges of being related to such a person. Because of communal life and strong family ties, the behaviour of such a person (or animal) stains the image of all the relatives. Also, a child who is not well educated is labelled or identified so that there is no confusion as to his or her origin. Because the origin of such child is clearly identified, this is an indication of the Mossi society's belief in the parents' responsibility in successfully raising a child. Thus, in the Mossi society a child who has not had a sound education is the child of someone, and the good child is everyone's child (see proverb number 1).

According to these proverbs, education is not carried out with a loud voice (*kwe zenkre*) or threats (*sibegre*). Education requires care and tenderness (*banem banem).* Beyond the words *banem banem* is also the idea of progression and stages in knowledge skills acquisition. Education must start as early as possible or else one runs the risk of raising children with 'unshaped heads'. Indeed, one has to straighten the wood while it is still green. Furthermore, the proverbs warn that if education does not start early, bad behaviour can become crystallised and hard to modify: *Na bi n manegba baasda ne zug weko.*

Education is not to be confused with instruction. Throughout the corpus of proverbs, education is viewed as a process which is meant to help the child grow and acquire a set of skills and behaviour that will make that person fit better into his or her environment. This is contained in the word *wubr*, 'to raise, to bring up with care' referred to in proverbs 5 and 6. Above all, the finality of education is *yam,* which is best translated in English as wisdom and intelligence. Unlike the colonial culture where one *is* intelligent, in the Mossi worldview, one *has* intelligence. The contrast is between a state of condition in Western culture and a possession in the Mossi culture. Because one *has yam* one can also lose it. In fact *yam* can be taken from a person. In such situations the Mossi will say: *Eb feoga a yama*. His or her intelligence and wisdom were taken away. This usually happens because of lack of respect for established social norms.

People who lack *yam* are perceived as marginal, and in fact parents and relatives tend to distance themselves from such individuals. Then again, the

fatalistic attitude, as well as the notion of cultivating patience, clearly transpires in the proverb *F sa ku f yalma, f to yalm n kuud fo.* ('If you kill your silly child, somebody else's silly child will kill you'). Therefore, one should not necessarily be outraged by a child's social failure (as to want to kill him or her) because he or she will quickly be replaced by another social failure. The Mossi culture seems thus to accept that there will be individuals who won't fit the mould and is prepared to deal with it by allowing time to help such individuals to grow and develop into accepted citizens.

But who is responsible for educating children in this society? The subject in all the proverbs is *Eb,* which has a general meaning similar to *one* or the impersonal plural *they* in English. *Eb* is impersonal and does not have connotations of gender or age. *Eb* in the Mossi language is used to express politeness, as in *Eb waame* ('he or she has arrived'): in this case *eb* is used to express respect for the person who is being talked about. *Eb* is also the subject used in biblical writing and religious ceremonies to describe God or the gods. The impersonal aspect of this pronoun can also be seen as evidence of the emphasis put on the role of society and the community to educate a child which is referred to in the African proverb: 'It takes a village to educate a child.'

The philosophy of education contained in these proverbs goes beyond the description of children's skills and behaviour. It also describes what an educated adult is. The good old person is able to conform to societal norms. Such a person is compared to medicine which can cure societal ills, *Nikiem song yaa tiim,* and one should utilise this person's knowledge and skills. Often these skills and experience are linked to age as explicitly stated in the word *nikiema* (old). Therefore, *Nikiem song del lalga naked bona a menga ti gjet nafe* ('He or she who looks up to the old person benefits from his or her knowledge and experience'). Thus, the ideal old individual is one who is a resource person, one who can provide advice and counselling in order to solve societal problems. *A yaa tiim.*

On the other hand, what is said about the bad old person? *Nikiem Yoog bangda a yandme*. One recognises the old adult at an early age. Also, the bad old person is one who overlooks the fact that a child will grow up one day: *Nikiem Yirga zi ti yaang bitame*. Such a person is not interested in the welfare of the youth since he or she does not seem to understand that one

day these children will reach adulthood. Moreover, one can easily identify such a person by his or her language: *Nisaal yoog bangda a gwame*. People who do not fit the Mossi cultural mould are thought of as having been raised in a non-Mossi-defined educational context often associated with foreign places or even a market as referred to in proverb 4. Of such bad adults, one asks: *Eb wuba fo raage la?* 'Were you raised in a market?' Thus, the importance of the context is also stressed in these proverbs or maxims, suggesting that the cultural context determines the quality of education that one receives. Often, if faced by bad behaviour some will use the following maxims: *Eb pa wuba ka ye*. 'He or she was not raised *here'* or *a ka bi ka ye,* 'he or she did not grow *up here'*.

Implications

Education as described in this article is no longer practised in most urban centres in Africa. Indeed, some Mossi children do not go through initiation any more and most children in the cities have never experienced the warmth of storytelling nights in villages. However, as anyone who has spent some time in Africa can bear witness, these proverbs continue to be used in a wide variety of situations regardless of whether the context relates to education.

Because modern education is rooted in a Western language and therefore in a different worldview, it does not necessarily emphasise the same ideal of an educated person and social norms that Mossi society values. As a result, Mossi society has come to perceive schooling as a phenomenon that uproots children. This concern is found in a Mossi saying: *Karenga saambda kamba* ('Schooling ruins kids').

To fully understand the importance of the recommendations below, it is crucial to remember that 80 per cent of all Africans exclusively speak a national language and still live in traditional areas where social behaviour is judged and assessed on the basis of cultural values and beliefs such as the ones presented in this study. It is therefore important for development agencies and anyone involved in developing educational endeavours in the Mossi context to become familiar with this philosophy of education in order to design relevant programs to meet the aspirations of local populations.

- Emphasise the value of oral tradition and include it as a valuable and relevant instructional medium and subject matter for education. It is one of the surest available ways of maintaining a viable link between the family and modern schools.
- Africanise pedagogical approaches so that they respond to learning styles of Africans. Memorisation, observation and group work are all ways that are considered effective in the traditional setting and should be considered for inclusion as instructional approaches in modern class rooms (see proverbs 16 and 20).
- Ensure the participation of the (rural) population in the design of educational programmes. Thus, storytellers, successful business people in the informal sector, traditional medical practitioners and farmers (who might lack Western language skills) should be invited into classrooms to share their knowledge and expertise. Effective participation by the rural population also ensures that the chasm between modern schools and villages and families will be greatly reduced.
- NGOs should consider the concepts of 'ideal educated persons' when choosing informants, who at present are chosen mainly from among those who have attended modern schools. The concept of education discussed in this study suggests that communities will tend to view such informants as uprooted and untrustworthy, as reflected in the proverb: *karenga saama kamba* ('Schooling ruined them'). To be appropriately effective, an informant must *have yam* (true knowledge and wisdom), which in turn will give more credibility to this person's views.

Conclusion

This study has shown how proverbs, the quintessential language form in Africa and particularly in the Mossi culture, can be used to analyse the beliefs and value system of a given people with regard to an important concept such as education. If we accept that language shapes our worldviews, then in fact in most African countries students are exposed simultaneously to several different worldviews: one which is based on African languages spoken at home, and another which stems from one of the colonial languages: French, English or Portuguese. The latter tends widen the differences in perception, values and thinking between Africans educated in modern schools and the rest of the population. As a South

African proverbs warns: 'Horns which are put on do not stick properly.' Further research is thus needed to study the effect of this variety of worldviews on Africans' ways and learning styles as well as views on important (foreign) concepts such as democracy, human rights, justice and peace which are currently being grappled with by African nations.

Notes

1 The Mossi population is around 5 million or approximately 60 per cent of the total population of Burkina Faso, estimated at 9 million.

2 In this study I deal only with the Mossi culture, although the relevancy of the study's findings to sub-Saharan Africa is discussed throughout.

3 These proverbs are part of a larger collection of about 200 proverbs collected in 1983 as part of a research project for the ethno-linguistic component of a master's degree thesis.

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Grassroot development facilitators and traditional local wisdom: the case of Malawi

M Chindongo

Introduction

This article is based on my own experience and the experience of other development facilitators[1] in World Vision Malawi (WVM). WVM is part of the Christian International Non-Governmental Organisation working on North-South partnership. World Vision started working in Malawi in 1982 and to date has projects in all 24 districts of the country. WVM works mainly in partnership with the churches, but in some cases the organisation works in partnership with District Development Committees.[2] As an organisation, our development approach is that of facilitating transformational grassroots development with full participation of the beneficiaries whom we commonly refer to as 'participants'.[3] Some of the activities that we are involved in are water provision, primary school education, nutrition, immunisation, adult literacy, small enterprise development, relief and rehabilitation, and afforestation.

In this article, I would like to reflect on the development facilitators in World Vision Malawi and how they have integrated or not integrated local traditional wisdom as they facilitate the development process. The term 'traditional local wisdom' will refer specifically to proverbs which are part of the means by which the people in Malawi, especially rural people, like to communicate. The proverbs cited are all biased towards development, although they can be used in other situations as well. I personally started working in grassroots development as a project coordinator in December 1984. However, long before that I had personally been fascinated by the way proverbs are used, that is as a way of expressing and teaching wisdom and how to live with others in the community. The communities that I coordinated were varied. Among them were the Chewa of the Central Region of Malawi, who like to communicate in proverbs and other wise sayings, leaving the listener to interpret the meaning. This type of communication is, of course, present in all the various groups of people in Malawi and, indeed, the whole of sub-Saharan Africa. I therefore felt that it was

important for me, as a development facilitator working with these communities, to understand and use local traditional wisdom as a way of facilitating discussions at the grassroot level. I do not claim to know everything and my process of learning continues.

In March 1992 an evaluation workshop for all WVM field staff and development facilitators was held. Participants from Zimbabwe and South Africa also attended. On each day of the workshop participants were encouraged to share proverbs that relate to development. This was the first time, as an organisation, that we looked critically at proverbs and discussed ways of enhancing our facilitation in the participatory development process. Thirty-three proverbs were identified, of which 13 were published in the World Vision International partnership publication *Together Journal*, 41, January–March 1994.[4] In this article, I have taken over some of these proverbs and added some new ones.

World Vision Malawi believes that it is vital that participants should be involved in the life-cycle of the project, that is from initiation, implementation and monitoring to evaluation of the development process. Rahman (in Burkey 1993:73) says: 'Participation is a process whose course cannot be determined from outside. Participation is generated by a continuing praxis of people, by a rhythm of collective action and reflection.'

Rahman believes that this is what makes the process the people's own as opposed to the people being mobilised, lead or directed, by outside forces. So it was felt that the use of proverbs would be one way of reaching out to the people to motivate or encourage them to discuss issues affecting their lives, thus increasing their participation in the development process. The communities feel that they are being given an opportunity to reflect on issues affecting them in language, ideas and perceptions they can understand.

The role of proverbs in grassroots development

Kaphagawani and Chidam'modzi (1983) say:

Proverbs are deep-rooted in the culture of the people and are a reflection of the people's attitude towards life and the world they live in; they

determine what people consider as promotive of their sense of the meaning of human existence.

Proverbs therefore constitute an attempt by the people to understand themselves and explain the world around them. All communities in Malawi, especially rural communities, do not communicate in a linear manner as many Westerners do. The proverbs they use, which are part and parcel of their lives, are never straightforward, as we all know. They have a hidden meaning and one has to deduce that meaning based on the way they apply the proverb. This poses a challenge to development facilitators, who have been trained in Western development models that are from a linear culture. There should be a deliberate attempt, therefore, on the part of the DFs to listen to and learn from the traditional local wisdom, so as to enhance their communication skills. This will also go a long way towards facilitating sustainable development processes at the grassroots.

As a graduate student of intercultural and international management focusing on sustainable development, I have discovered – as many others have done – that all Western models of development are deeply rooted in ethnocentrism.[5] Some of these models have just been transferred to another culture without considering the differences of mentality in that society. Therefore, the way these societies will look at their world will also be different. One cannot expect that Malawi, for example, will have to go through the same stages that the West has done to reach the level of the so-called developed countries.

Thierry G Verhelst (1990) states that Western models of development have not been successful in the South. One of the contributing factors has been that culture has been a forgotten dimension in the whole process. So there might have been good intentions in certain projects but because of failure to learn from these cultures the results have not been encouraging. There is, therefore, a need for development facilitators to learn how to adapt local traditional wisdom and maximise it in communicating with the grassroots level. Local traditional wisdom is deeprooted in the lives of the people and thus forms a basis of their cultural expression and can further facilitate a critical reflection on their past, present and future.

Local wisdom and the facilitation of participatory development processes

In this section, I would like to share some proverbs that were collected at the 1992 WVM Evaluation Workshop. These proverbs were used to learn more about participatory evaluation and development processes. The participants shared the proverbs they knew and used in their work. The proverbs selected here relate to five categories: knowledge and resources; collaboration; learning; thinking; and obstacles to development. I will present the proverb, a literal translation, and its application.

Proverbs relating to knowledge and resources

They call for all participants, development facilitators and beneficiaries, to work together in unity/harmony and appreciation of shared knowledge and resources. These proverbs teach the DFs that they do not have the monopoly of knowledge and can learn a great deal from the wisdom of the poor. Paulo Freire (1972:37) states: 'A man who proclaims devotion to the cause of liberation yet is unable to enter into *communion* with the people, whom he continues to regard as totally ignorant, is grievously self-deceived.'

Korten (1990) affirms this, stating that the choices to be made are too important to be left to politicians, technocrats and bureaucrats; the people's voice must be heard in defining the vision that drives these choices, as the people will bear the consequences for these choices.

1 *Mulomo umoza ungapoka nyama ku nkhalamu yayi* (Tumbuka).
Translation: 'When a lion preys, no one person can rescue the livestock.'
Application: Unity provides strength through which any obstacle can be overcome.
2 *Eni ache mudzi ali ngati mizu ya kachere, akapangana zatha* (Chichewa).
Translation: 'The village community is like a Kachere tree, the roots of which appear spread all over but in fact go deep into the earth and converge underneath.'
Application: The community's policies and dynamics are best known by the people themselves. One must understand how the community makes its decisions and who is making the decisions. Or one must understand

how the community thinks before bringing in new ideas. Because if the people do not agree with the new ideas, they might not tell the outsider how they feel about them and simply ignore or neglect them.

3 *Kudya nsolo wa mphende nkhupisilana* (Sena).
Translation: 'No one person should eat the fish head alone (when eating fish in a group, the fish head should be shared by all').
Application: Opportunities should be shared. Knowledge is power and therefore needs to be shared.

Proverbs relating to collaboration

Collaboration is necessary, says Paulo Freire (1972), because the poor need to be conscientised so that they learn how to 'read' their reality and write their own history. In this regard, it is important to collaborate with others within and outside the community, as they participate in the development and evaluation process.

1 *Nzeru zayekha anabvika nsima m'madzi* (Chichewa).
Translation: 'A person who thought he was very wise and did not need help from others, dipped the very food he was to eat in water because of not asking what was in the container.'
Application: You cannot be a jack of all trades; you need to ask others for help. No one person can claim solo wisdom or intelligence (especially bearing in mind that rural Malawians are living in a collective society).

2 *Mutu umodzi susenza denga* (Chichewa).
Translation: 'One head cannot carry a roof.'
Application: Collaboration is vital. One needs the wisdom and cooperation of other people.

3 *Munwe umoza ungaswa shaba yayi* (Tumbuka).
Translation: 'One finger cannot shell a groundnut on its own.'
Application: Similar to 2 above.

Proverbs relating to learning

These proverbs relate to understanding the community in which a DF is working. The community will help the DFs to adopt a listening posture.

Many times development practitioners have problems listening to and interpreting verbal and non-verbal communication from the communities. The results are white elephant projects which were originally planned and implemented with good intentions but end up being neither sustainable nor empowering the people.

1 *Ali dere nkulinga utayenda naye* (Chichewa).
Translation: 'You cannot claim to know someone unless you have walked with him/her.'
Application: You must experience the successes and struggles of the people in a community before claiming to understand them.
2 *Wandisokosera nkulinga utamva* (Chichewa).
Translation: 'You cannot say people are making noise unless you have heard what they said.'
Application: A good facilitator must be a good listener.
3 *Kuwona nkhujula maso ghawili uwo* (Tumbuka).
Translation: 'To see is to open both eyes wide.'
Application: One has to be a critical observer of things around him/her or one has to listen carefully and read between the lines. Seek the hidden treasure.
4 *Kuwona maso a nkhono n'kufatsa* (Chichewa).
Translation: 'A person who was patient saw the eyes of the snail.'
Application: If you listen carefully to what is being said, you will be able to understand the way people function or act.

Proverbs relating to thinking

These proverbs call for analysis, synthesis and setting priorities in evaluation. Transformational development process, as already indicated, emphasises the integration of evaluation in the development process. These proverbs go a long way towards bringing out a critical reflection on the data collected.

1 *Chuluke-chuluke ndi wa njuchi, umanena imene yakuluma* (Chichewa).
Translation: 'In a swarm of bees, you must identify which one has stung you.'
Application: Focus and analyse the data in order to draw conclusions; or

in planning a project with the community, you need to identify together the root causes of the problems to be dealt with for a meaningful and sustainable development process to take place.

2 *Pagwa bulu patelera* (Chichewa).
Translation: 'Where a donkey falls, it's slippery ground.'
Application: Some issues need careful planning to avoid failure.

3 *M'mphechepeche mwa njobvu sapitamo kawiri* (Chichewa).
Translation: 'You don't go between an elephant's legs/thighs twice.'
Application: Don't make the same mistake twice or learn from your past mistakes to avoid greater problems.

4 *Chinansolo chinanzeru* (Sena).
Translation: 'Whatever has a head has intelligence.'
Application: Every person in the community has the intelligence and wisdom to contribute ideas.

Obstacles to development

These proverbs identify problems which may be encountered when facilitating development processes and it is important to know them and know the counter-proverbs. Some of them have been perpetuated by the blueprint planning of certain projects, mainly by government, where people became only passive recipients of development. So people either become complacent or do not want to contradict the one regarded as 'all-knowing'.

1 *Mlendo ndiye adza n'kalumo kakuthwa* (Chichewa).
Translation: 'The visitor is the one who brings in a sharp razor blade.'
Application: Visitors or those new to a society are carriers and introducers of new and novel ideas which may either be a solution to some problems or contribute towards the search for solutions.

A counter-proverb to this one is:
Mlendo ananyula maliro a eni; or: Ndikonze-ndikonze anasupula mtembo wa eni (Chichewa).
Translation: 'A visitor or stranger finding a group of people troubled on how they will wash and prepare the dead person's body (the person had been sick for a long time) quickly offered their service to bathe it. In the process they ended up peeling its skin.'
Application: If you do not understand the issues at stake, do not be too

quick to offer solutions. In grassroots development, only those who live in the community, see and feel the problems, and understand how deep those problems affect their lives. Therefore, they also have solutions to those problems and the DF, who is an outsider, can only facilitate the process towards finding solutions.

2 *Nkukana nsalu ya akulu nkuviika* (Chichewa).
Translation: 'To refuse to wash an older person's cloth is to just dip it in water.'
Application: just do what they tell you to do or you really do not have to listen to what the elders are saying. In development, a DFs' perception of the grassroots will determine how much he will listen to the people.

A counter-proverb is:-

Mau akulu akoma akagonera (Chichewa).
Translation: 'The words of the elders become sweet some day, or stand the test of the times.'
Application: It is very important to listen and take heed of the voices of the elders in a development process.

Some implications for development facilitation by World Vision Malawi

Throughout this article, I have tried to indicate the relevance of these proverbs for the grassroot development process. Most of the DFs in WVM that I have worked with, and some that I interviewed as I wrote this paper, do use proverbs in their work with communities. I found that for those who grew up in rural areas, proverbs are part of their lives. The problem, however, has been a lack of systematic documentation of the local traditional wisdom and how it can be integrated in development theories and models.

Of the ten development facilitators interviewed, seven use proverbs in their work with communities. The use of these proverbs, however, is done unconsciously. All the staff who integrate traditional local wisdom, except two, are based in the communities. Thus they have more time to interact with the community and observe the way the people live. There is mutual understanding with the community and they have more appreciation of the local wisdom than those facilitators who are based outside the community and merely go into the community once or twice a month.

Fletcher Tembo, one of the facilitators based in Mpata community in Karonga, said: 'We have moved on each step of this programme following the local wisdom, without which we would not have some of the success stories we have.' On the other hand, Bertha Chunda, who is based in Blantyre and coordinates projects outside her base, said: 'It is difficult to fully understand the community because I do not live there; I do not share their everyday joys and struggles.' However, Willie Kalonga, another facilitator in a similar situation to Bertha, said that he has tried to understand the way people communicate in Makanjira. Makanjira is one area where, he says, people just love to express themselves through proverbs. So when he is in that community, he consciously uses proverbs to deepen his understanding of the people.

Facilitators who live outside the community do not have that much opportunity to really share the communities' life. It has been difficult for such facilitators to appreciate more deeply the local wisdom in the communities they work with.

Conclusion

As we approach the twenty-first century, it will be very important, I believe, for development practitioners to look more and more at culture-based grassroots development models. Malawi, like many other countries, has many rich proverbs, most of which have neither been analysed nor documented. Development facilitators need to be consciously aware of, listen to and integrate these proverbs as they work with the people for any meaningful development to take place. I believe this could make our programmes more culturally appropriate and channel a high level of participation and creativity into the whole process. There are certain unique elements in a particular community; even if all the DFs are Malawians, they may still be new to that particular community and their training may also alienate them from the people. Development should be promoted in a way that respects the culture of the people because development is a profoundly cultural matter, in the sense that it is intertwined with and affects a people's whole way of life. Charles D Kleymeyer (1994:18) says: 'Nothing motivates people quite like cultural expression; it unlocks creative forces that otherwise remain dormant or go unrecognised.'

WVM realised a few years ago that what Robert Chambers (1983) calls 'tourist type of grassroot development facilitation' is totally unsuited to our context. Experience confirms that this superficial, if not misguided, facilitation does not bring lasting results and is not sustainable. As an organisation, we are moving closer and closer to the people so that the kind of development that we facilitate becomes people centred (that is owned and directed by the people themselves). The government of Malawi is now saying that all projects should be planned and implemented together with the communities (although we are yet to see how they will do this). An indigenous Latin American leader, Mariano Lopez (in Kleymeyer 1994:195) says:

> Culture is like a tree; if the green branches – a people's language, legends, customs – are carelessly chopped off, then the roots that bind people to their place on earth and to each other also begin to wither. The wind and rain and the elements carry the topsoil away; the land becomes desert.

Local wisdom and values, some of which are deeply embedded in the proverbs, must be a starting point for the kind of development that NGOs such as WVM are involved in. Otherwise we might find that we, the facilitators, are operating according to a different paradigm from that of the community, resulting in unsustainable development and development that disempowers the poor more and more. There is need, therefore, for all development facilitators and their managers to understand and use proverbs (in addition to other local traditional wisdom) in their work with communities.

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Notes

1 Generally a development facilitator is a catalyst in grassroot development but in World Vision Malawi, the term refers to those who stay in the community with the people. In this article however, I have used the term 'development facilitator' in the general sense.

2 DDC is a development committee responsible for coordination of all development projects in a district. Its members are the technical staff from government ministries, traditional chiefs and members of Parliament. The district commissioner is the chairman of this committee.

3 World Vision Malawi works mainly with the rural communities who comprise 89% of the population of Malawi – National Statistical Office 1987 population results, Zomba, Malawi.

4 The article was entitled: 'Local wisdom: indigenous proverbs as guide to evaluation.' I co-authored this paper with Prof Ronald J R Mathies of Conrad Grebel College, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada. Most of the proverbs referred to here have been taken from that article.

5 Larry Samovar and Richard Porter quoting Keesing in *An introduction to intercultural communication, a reader (1994)* say:

> Ethnocentrism is a universal tendency for any people to put its own culture and society in a central position of priority and worth. Enthocentrism, therefore, becomes a perceptual window through which a culture interprets and judges all other cultures.

PART III

Proverbs and religion

The ethical nature of God in African religion as expressed in African proverbs

John S Mbiti

Introduction

This essay examines concepts about the ethical nature of God as contained and expressed in 70 African proverbs. Since proverbs reflect on and address themselves to many areas of life, it is to be expected that some would speak about God. There are many of these, but we focus only on the ethical nature of God. The 70 proverbs lend themselves to a wide range of themes as listed at the end of the essay. Naturally some of them overlap, giving us a complex picture of expressing different concepts about God's moral or ethical nature. The selection is taken from eastern, southern and western Africa – Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, Namibia and Ghana. My sources contain a total of 9 932 proverbs, and the selection could have had more than these 70. In view of the over two million proverbs in the whole of Africa and Madagascar, it can be reckoned statistically that over 14 000 proverbs speak of the ethical nature of God. Our selection would represent about 0,5 per cent of that total. This is statistically very insignificant. However, it helps us to gain glimpses of the ethical nature of God in African Religion – at least as people try to speak about him.

The sources from which I have selected the proverbs do not expound on the context or specific meaning of individual proverbs as such. In some cases they give a short setting in which the proverbs are used. Many of these 70 proverbs come from the Oromo whereas those from the Swahili speakers in Tanzania (and Kenya) are comparatively small in number. This reflects also the total number of the proverbs contained in each source, but alone it does not indicate that the Oromo talk more about God than the Swahili speakers do. The book by Cotter (1990) on Oromo proverbs contains 4 670, whereas that by Kalugila (1977) contains 309. However, we are not concerned here with statistical or other comparisons, and for practical purposes it does not matter how many of the proverbs come from any one country or region.

As I am not able to analyse the proverbs in their original African language, it means, among other things, that certain meanings are lost and others may not be correctly conveyed by the English translations. As I do not know the languages represented (apart from Gikuyu and Swahili, neither of which is my mother tongue), it would have been futile to venture into a linguistic analysis, which is an exercise best entrusted to native speakers and experts on the languages concerned. In some cases I have put into brackets those parts of the proverbs which, in addition to the actual translations, seem to be explanations or interpretations by the collectors (editors) of the proverbs. While such appendages illuminate the meaning, application, or background of the proverbs concerned, they are not necessarily the real content of the proverbs. For the same reason, my own interpretation and use of these proverbs in this essay may not necessarily conform to the real meaning and usage in the social, cultural, linguistic, religious and philosophical or ethical milieu in which the proverbs have arisen and are used. I stand to be corrected.

The nature of God is a mystery. African religion acknowledges him as the One Creator and Sustainer of all things. It speaks of his intrinsic or eternal nature which distinguishes him from what he has created. It also speaks about his relations to creation, especially to humankind. It is in this area of God's relationship to persons (man in the generic sense) that we speak of the ethical concepts about him. This article examines the areas of that ethical relationship in particular between God and humankind, male and female, and in general ways towards creation (nature) at large. At the end of the article are three lists, two of which need to be consulted in the discussion which follows. First, the 70 proverbs are numbered according to the alphabetical sequence of first words. This numbering is used in the essay to facilitate direct references. Second, the themes of ethical concepts are also listed alphabetically and numbered (with an E). Some of them are discussed separately, and others jointly in one section. I searched first for the proverbs which seemed to have ethical concepts about God. In studying them closely, various themes emerged, which led to the grouping of the proverbs according to their thematic contents. The third list comprises bibliographical sources to which the selection is confined. Direct quotations of the proverbs are made in the text without further bibliographical references; and only in a few cases are names of the relevant peoples and places indicated – since these are otherwise shown in the list of sources. In

speaking about God I am forced by the English language to use masculine pronouns, whereas in the original African languages this may not be necessary.

God is above criticism (E1)

Proverbs covering this theme point to a kind of theodicy. One cannot criticise God for what seems paradoxical, contradictory or against expectation. 'God is a donkey rolling (in the dust)' (13). This is intended to remind people that God's actions are not to be questioned. His actions are pure, without blemish, and honourable. They are to be accepted without questioning. He gives this to one person and that to another. A beggar (27) confesses that his/her state of poverty is not to be blamed on God, but on the parents who may have failed to bring him/her up so as to avoid poverty. If anything, the parents make the person's material condition worse by expecting to be supported by their son or daughter. She or he defends God and says: 'I bear my Creator no grudge, but my lazy parents.' The blame is put onto the parents, who were lazy in the upbringing of their son/daughter. In contrast and by implication, God cannot be lazy like human beings. The proverb thrusts great responsibility onto the parents and how they bring up their children. God is not to blame for failures in life or failure to fulfil human responsibilities.

On the other hand, it is recognised that various public positions are granted by God to certain men and women in their society (35). If such people misuse, abuse, or corrupt their positions, the blame is not put on God who put them there in the first place. Proverb 50 is a clear affirmation that God is above criticism. In distributing abilities to people, he deals without favour, without discrimination. Therefore there should be no place for envy or jealousy among individuals when they see what good things he has given or done to others.

God is good (E8), holy (E10) and perfect (E19)

This set of concepts is related to the previous one. The Akan say categorically in two proverbs that: 'God does not like evil' (10) and: 'Since God

does not like wickedness (fraud), God gave every creature a name' (42). Because pure goodness is the nature of God, there is no place for evil in him. For that matter, for example, the Maasai state explicitly that: 'God never listens to the robber' (17). Robbers, by definition and 'profession', are evil. This proverb clearly dissociates God from human beings such as robbers and murderers who deal with evil. His nature is contrary to that of robbers. He shows his goodness towards people in that he gives them good things abundantly and freely. In contrast, the robbers take away constantly and forcefully from people. The goodness of God is seen not just in the abstract, but in concrete ways, as the Oromo acknowledge: 'That which the Lord filled will not fail' (There are always more good things coming from the Lord) (45). Further, what he does stands on sound foundation, as another proverb states: 'The house that God built does not fall' (God is the proper foundation for a person's life) (53). Even Nature itself bears witness to the abundant goodness of God. This is put into the mouth of the hawk which, flying high above, has a good view of the ground below and sees the goodness of God, according to the Akan proverb (51) in which: 'The hawk says: "All that God has created is good".' That seems to be a challenge to human beings to behold and be aware of the goodness of God in creation. Even the food we eat is an expression of his goodness, which should not be denied to anyone, according to proverb 63: 'Those who because of God eat, because of man will not spend the night without eating' (People cannot deny to a person what God has given him/her). This proverb would seem to say that God gives food out of his goodness, and people should not take that food away or otherwise cause others to pass the night hungry. This is a proverb about justice and about sharing God's goodness and abundance.

When the Maasai say: 'It is impossible to bend the arms of God' (37), this can be interpreted to refer to his ethical integrity. He is not only all-powerful but is also so perfect that he cannot be forced to do what is against His will. There is no room and no need to change the actions of his arms. This same idea is expressed in the Ghanaian proverb: 'Men cannot change God's predestined decision on an issue' (Man proposes, God disposes) (38). God's plans for individuals and the world spring out of His perfect nature and cannot be changed. This concept is also emphasised in proverb 42: 'Since God does not like wickedness (fraud), God gave every creature a name.' Individuality, the identity of each person and each creature, shows

the perfect working of God: no two persons or things are absolutely identical, otherwise they would not be two but one and the same. For that reason also, each person is responsible for her/his deeds - one should not be punished for the wickedness of others.

In the same category of concepts, God is also considered to be righteous. He judges righteously between good and evil (1); he helps those who walk righteously or call upon him (18); and he has put conscience into persons, so that they can also be shown or reminded what is right and wrong, good and evil. A proverb which speaks clearly on this issue, is: 'God's witness is conscience (*ahonim*)' (According to the Akan, it is *ahonim* which tells us when we have done right or wrong, and it is regarded as that which witnesses to God) (21). He treats all with loving righteousness, providing all with rain, water, sustenance (58) and structures for maintaining peace and order for the wellbeing of all people (cf 35). Governmental authority comes from him and has to be exercised with righteousness and justice towards all: 'It is God who enstools a talented leader as chief and commits the townsmen to his care' (35).

God is compassionate (E2) and kind (E15)

Many proverbs speak about these characteristics of God. They arise from people's experiences, in view of their life struggles. There are many dangers and threats to life, such as famines, wars, diseases, accidents, disasters, catastrophes and human injustices. People experience and appreciate the kindness and compassion of God in the face of these hardships and threats. For example, out of his kindness, he supplies the family with what it needs, as expressed in the Oromo proverb: 'By the kindness (of God) the house is satisfied' (Through God's kindness the family will be satisfied) (5). Even individuals are aware of God's kindness for their lives and they trust him to meet their needs, in spite of what other people may do to them. Therefore, one can with confidence quote proverbs such as: 'I who made this hole (in my ear lobe) will fill it (with an earring). Let Him (the Lord) Who made this hole (my mouth) fill it' (I trust that God Who made me, will take care of me) (28); or, 'If God gives you a calabash full of (palm) wine and a living man kicks it over, God fills it up again' (When God blesses a person and an

evil-minded person or neighbour attempts to thwart it, God continues to bless that person) (29). Another appropriate proverb to quote is: 'If God gives you sickness, God gives you its cure' (The ancient Akan experienced God's providence and mercy, and expressed them in this proverb) (30). Even when something seems lost, God may yet surprise the concerned person and show that before him it was not lost. Such an experience leads one to proclaim: 'God lost, but He does not lose forever; a man He puts in a safe place' (God does not abandon a person) (16).

People are also aware of God's caring love towards the whole creation. For that reason the Ovambo say: 'God speaks a foreign tongue' (Do not torment God's creatures; you will be punished) (19). His compassion extends to the whole creation. He cares for people and nature. His compassion cannot be extinguished by the wickedness of people. He fills up the calabash again and again with wine (29), and gives healing to diseases which inflict people. His caring for them has no discrimination, so that what he puts aside for the blind person will not be taken by the person who has full sight, who is not disabled (44). Similarly, a Swahili proverb states: 'What God preserves for the poor does not rot (66).' In the light of God's compassion no one has an unfair advantage over another. He shows compassion and care also to those who are strong and healthy, looking after them like a mother takes care of all her children: 'The mother of a brave man is God' (God cares for a courageous person like his/her mother (57). That is a beautiful image of God – the caring, loving, compassionate Mother of all.

This caring compassion extends throughout people's lives. He is their Shepherd, from birth to death, as one proverb states: 'The Lord shepherds a person all days, then one day He pulls the man down' (God is dependable until the end) (54). He supplies people with what they need for their lives, so that they have abundance: 'The people of God gather pumpkins' (60). God's compassion is shown in the details of daily life, so that every mouthful we take depends on or happens because of it: 'On the spoon already, if God (wishes) it will reach the mouth and enter it' (Without God, something could happen to us at any time, even between spoonfuls) (41). Even when people do wrong and deserve to be punished, God is compassionate enough to wait. So the Akan would say: 'When God picks up God's stone, God does not throw it at once' (The compassionate God does not hurriedly

punish, but God's justice will surely come) (68). And even when punishment does come, it is a saving and not an annihilating punishment. So the Oromo explain this point with the proverb: 'The beating of God, the strong man breaks and heals' (God punishes and heals) (47).

God's compassion should also be shown by people towards one another. Therefore, the Akan warn: 'If you cheat the crab, God sees your buttocks' (33). God's kindness has no boundaries. It is infinite in comparison with that of human beings which is limited. It is categorically stated that: 'The home of a person runs out (of kindness). In the home of God it never ends' (God is forever kind) (52). People should receive God's kindness with gratitude, as the Ovambo remind us: 'What is given by God, receive it with both hands' (67).

God is generous (E7) and providential (E21)

God is generous, especially towards human beings. We may work hard, but what we receive comes ultimately from his generosity, from his enabling and helping us. So a proverb categorically states: 'Gifts from above come, man in vain labours' (Without help from above, one labours in vain) (7). This is an encouraging reminder of people's dependence on God. Yet it may also dishearten some people who labour hard without seeing immediate (or any) results. But God will supply again and again, without stopping even if evil persons interfere, since his generosity knows no end (29). Nevertheless, a certain amount of cooperation is needed. People have to play their part and do what they can. In a beautiful way it is said in Ghana: 'If you want to form a Farm Clearing Co-operative Society with God, then you better attend to his farm first' (and he will reward you with more blessing) (34). Yet, paradoxically, some people seem to receive more than others, as another proverb explains: 'People who are favoured by God enjoy an abundance' (55).

God's generosity is exercised freely and people have no reason to worry unduly about their lives. 'The mouth is God's gourd; He knows what to fill into (it)' (God feeds; men should not worry) (59). It enriches those who trust him (70), but it should also be shared further with other people. His generosity is a challenge, an example to people, so that they also act

generously towards one another, as one proverbs teaches us: 'To the person who gives, God will give' (God will give something to the person who gives to someone else) (65).

God's generosity is a particular expression of his providence. On the part of people, patience is sometimes needed. 'If God is weaving for you a rich silk fabric, be patient and do not interrupt his plans, else your fabric may turn into an inferior jute material' (31). What he provides is of high quality. He will give babies to mothers, as he will, or other things to those who call upon him. So people may pray: 'Oh God, give me shade and not that of the tree' (originally a woman's prayer for a child, now used for anything desired) (39). His providence is extended without discrimination, to all – the poor and the rich, the blind and the seeing, the young and the aged. This concept seems to be behind an Ovambo proverb which says: 'Spirit of the homeless, God of the poor and the rich' (People give God many names because he helps everyone) (43, also 44, 47, 55). All creatures have food to eat and drink from the inexhaustible Source, out of God's providence. So it is said: 'The mouth eats because of God and the clouds' (God orders the rain with which a person grows his/her food) (58). People may not deny others their sustenance, since it all comes from God's providence. Yet this may mean that he takes from one person and gives to another, as the proverb seems to imply which says: 'To make the poor full, God kills a (rich man's) cow that gives milk' (One person's loss is another's gain) (64).

God is helpful (E9) and supportive (E25)

In matters which seem impossible for people, God is experienced as being specially helpful and supportive. So it is said by the Oromo: 'An issue for which there is no answer God did not create' (God helps people to resolve all problems) (3). There is a solution to every issue, because God stands behind it. Even when people work hard to resolve issues, he is working behind them to help and encourage them, otherwise they work in vain: 'Gifts from above come, man in vain labours' (Without help from above, one labours in vain) (7). Nevertheless, it is important that people take part in realising God's help. He works with them to help them – freely, yes –

but they may or should make an effort to do their part. Several proverbs from different parts of Africa address this concept. One Swahili proverb calls upon those who look to God to work with him: '"God help me" helps himself/herself too' (12). The Oromo urge people to act and not wait lazily upon God's help: "God is present", you said, then don't sleep on the road (God helps those who help themselves) (15). Likewise 'God said: "Go out onto the road and call upon me,"' (God helps those who are trying to walk in the right way) (18). It is significant in that this particular proverb uses the direct words of God: 'God said ...' That is something rare in African religion, in which direct speaking by God is quoted, recorded or passed on indirectly. Perhaps this is to emphasise how important it is to work with God in order to receive his support, his help. People are on the right track, so to speak, when they urge one another: 'Help yourself so that I may help you' (26; also proverbs 25, 28, 36, 43). It is a beautiful way to say that God helps the one-handed person to prepare food *(fufuu)*, for her/his maintenance and that of others. The person does not just sit down and cry that she/he cannot work for a living. He/she should use the one arm she/he has, and God will provide the other arm or hand to make her/his efforts fruitful.

Because people can do their part, God encourages them and supports even the weakest. He stands as support to the weak, the poor, the handicapped, the underprivileged, the aged, the sick. Several proverbs speak to this effect. 'A poor person: (if the Lord) his supports refuses, teeth he lacks' (A poor person absolutely depends on God's gifts: rain, food, tools, etc.) (2). Presumably this proverb implies that God's support to the poor includes not only rain, food and tools, but also the teeth with which to eat the food: it is total support, total sustenance. Nevertheless, the people themselves have to chew, swallow and digest the food – God will not do that for them.

God's support is firm and unwavering. Nobody can twist his supportive arm. People can rely on it; they can have confidence in him and say: 'It is impossible to bend the arms of God' (37). Even the weak and the aged can be supported by God so that they do unlikely things: 'On God's errands even old women run' (40). So strong is the supportive presence of God. He can really be called Spirit of the homeless, God of the poor and the rich (43). He is with the blind to protect their welfare (44); he deals gently with the sick and justly with the strong (47). He provides clouds with rain to

water the fields where people work, so that: 'The mouth eats because of God and the clouds' (58, cf 59). The result can be abundance and plentifulness of basic necessities as symbolised by the pumpkins, of which it is said in proverb 60: The people of God gather pumpkins. God cares abundantly for everyone, even the little the poor have: 'What God preserves for the poor does not rot' (66). The poor can also have confidence in God, for he is on their side and looks after their needs however modest they might be. If need be, he may even take from the rich to give to the poor, as one proverbs asserts in a dramatic way: 'To make the poor full, God kills a (rich man's) cow that gives milk' (64).

God is dependable (3), faithful (5), reliable (23) and unfailing (E28)

If the poor were to refuse the support and help that God gives them, there would be no other source for their existence. They depend entirely upon him (2). Indeed, all people depend on him among the changes and chances of normal life. For that reason the Ovambo would say: 'If there were not a God (*Nampongo*) in the country, we wanderers would suffer need.' (Also: 'A wanderer does not know whether he/she will meet hardships'). (A person on his/her way somewhere does not know whether he/she will return or die there) (32). To live is to reckon with uncertainties and risks. In the light of this, only God is absolutely dependable. Even the crabs can rely on him (33). He shepherds his people (54), looks after them – they depend on Him and He does not let them down. Even the mouth depends on Him, to fill it with food, because: 'The mouth is God's gourd; He knows what to fill into (it)' (59).

God is faithful to himself, his nature and his being. In the natural world, he causes all things to run according to his ordinance and will. This is seen, for example, in the way he makes the sun rise and set regularly: 'God because he is, the sun rises' (8). He keeps faithful watch over the whole creation. People can state categorically that: 'God is not asleep' (14). He is absolutely aware of everything. In dealing with people, he does not abandon them, as one proverb confidently says: 'God lost, but he does not lose forever; a man he puts in a safe place' (God does not abandon a person)

(16). It may appear as if God has abandoned someone who finds him/herself in difficulties. But God is faithful and brings the person to safety in the end. Or, in situations of injustice, eventually God sees to it that justice is brought about. People can say in such situations: 'He has that which divides, that is, there is a judge for him, and he will avenge me' (This is an expression of the belief that God sees and knows everything and brings everything to book. God's justice is therefore unfailing) (22). Or, in times of family or personal needs, people should not give up but take courage in the knowledge that God will take care of them (fill their mouth, 28); he will make the calabash stand up with wine, if someone knocks it down (29); he will provide clothing, by weaving a rich silk fabric (31). They know that he provides food – he pounds *fufuu* with the handicapped (36); he provides strength and support for the weak (37); he gives good things without fail (45); he is the firm foundation for those who trust in Him (53); he provides rain and abundance (58, 59); he gives help at the right moment (62), and preserves the rights of even the poor and weak (66).

Through these and many other experiences, people affirm that God is faithful, dependable and reliable. They can trust in him. He is unchanging (8, 37,) and 'Men cannot change God's predestined decision on an issue' (Man proposes, God disposes) (38). He is unfailing, he will act at the right time. People may need to remind themselves: 'God does not hurry. (What) he sends to the earth to arrive does not fail' (God's actions are above time and place) (9). Where there is a particular need, God meets it according to his will, for he is unfailing: 'The appetite that is open, God is able to close' (Men should trust God for food) (46; so also 62).

God is loving (E16) and compassionate (E2)

While love is a strong moral value for the individual, family and society, in traditional African life it seems that people do not talk much about it in the abstract. Rather, it is shown and experienced more in deed than in word. A man may never tell his wife that he loves her – she will know that through his deeds towards her. Similarly, the wife may not tell her husband directly that she loves him: he will judge by her deeds. Parents may not tell their children directly that they love them; neither may the children tell their

parents that they love them. In each case it is the deeds which speak rather than the words. This traditional attitude to love seems also to be projected onto God. There are rare statements speaking directly about the love of God towards creation, the world and people. Instead, people experience his love in various ways. Some would say that if God did not love them, he would not have created them. Others see his love through providence, rescuing from danger, providing in times of need, through justice, through giving them children, rain and good harvest, through good health and in some cases long life, through material wealth, through safety in journeys and undertakings, and so on.

I did not find proverbs in my sources which explicitly mention love. But the many ethical concepts we have listed indicate how and where people find God to be loving towards them. In one proverb it is clearly shown that God's love is for all people, without condition, without discrimination: 'God has everything; even the Wata have cattle' (The Wata are lowerclass people who make pottery) (God loves His creatures and provides for them) (11). God loves all people as evidenced by His gifts to all. He loves also Nature at large, as the Ovambo warn: 'God speaks a foreign tongue' (Do not torment God's creatures ...) (19). His compassion, his help, his providence towards all, these and many others are all expressions of God's love towards people in particular and the world in general.

God as judge (E13, E14)

This concept is also widely mentioned. In particular it is emphasised that God's judgement is fair and just. Only God discerns correctly between good and evil, as one proverb affirms: 'A man says this is good and that is bad but he knows nothing of the two' (that is only God can judge good and bad) (1). This also implies that only God can ultimately deal with evil, because he is the dependable and just Judge. We cannot complain about the distribution of his gifts, since he does what is good and right, according to His will (13). As Judge, God also metes out punishment (19). In the case of injustice, he avenges the offended, and one can leave judgement to him, with the proverb: He has that which divides, that is 'There is a Judge for him, and He will avenge me' (22). It is he who also determines the course of people's

lives, and can bring about unexpected turn of events. Thus: 'He who plants is not he who eats' (Man proposes, God disposes) (24). Even nature is the object of God's justice and he may avenge nature if people misuse or abuse it. There is a clear warning in the proverb: 'If you cheat the crab, "God sees your buttocks".' This is used to mean that 'Nothing is hidden from God; all cheating and unkindness are seen by God', who acts to bring about justice and due punishment (33).

God's justice embraces everything: 'God gave every creature a name' (42) – as a mark of genuine individuality and identity and to avoid fraud. The individuality, the personal identity is to be respected; each individual person is responsible for her/his own doings. God judges people on the basis of their individuality. They must reckon with punitive justice, as another proverb picturesquely puts it: 'The God *Nampongo* has turned a big hunk of firewood towards us, there are sparks in the fire, we will burn' (49). Justice can burn – it burns out evil and injustice, it purifies and saves. It may take long for God's justice or help to be realised. But it surely comes without fail. 'There is nothing which can delay (God's) help (permanently), (If God has determined that you will succeed, no matter how long it takes, you will eventually attain your goal) (62).

God's just dealing with people, however, may need their participation. He gives gifts and abilities, but people must utilise them, otherwise they remain dormant and even unused. This is clearly expressed in the proverb: 'Any calabash that has got a bottom can stand upright' (The proverb means that God gives every man what is required by human nature: but it depends on man to exploit such gifts,) (Every man is the architect of his own fortune) (4). This proverbs emphasises the same point as those which say that God helps those who help themselves. People are not without responsibility before God – they are living people and can exercise a measure of co-working with Him. But in certain cases, people's situation is determined by God and they cannot do anything about it. This seems to be the view expressed in the proverb: 'He who is ugly is not so because he refused to smear himself with fat' (but rather because he had no fat to smear himself with. We are what God made us) (23). Nevertheless, even when we are seemingly disadvantaged, God exercises his justice upon us, like safe-guarding what he has given to the blind (44). Since he handles everyone

fairly and justly (50), what God does to different individuals should not be reason for envy. There are surprises in his just dealings with people. Therefore it is said in one proverb: 'The man chosen by God is not the one chosen by men' (56). And another cautions: 'When the day has not ended, you do not grumble (complain) against God' (God has his own way of doing things. If one exercises patience, one will surely experience God's grace and beneficence) (69).

God is patient (E18) and trustworthy (E25)

In contrast to human beings, God is pictured as being unfailingly patient. So it is stated categorically: 'God does not hurry. (What) He sends to the earth to arrive does not fail, (God's actions are above time and place)' (9). In view of his great patience, people should learn to wait for his actions to unfold. For that reason: 'If God is weaving for you a rich silk fabric, be patient and do not interrupt his plans, else your fabric may turn into an inferior jute material' (31). Another proverb asserts: 'The deeds of God come slowly' (Unlike men, God works slowly) (48). People can trust him; what he has started to do, he will bring to completion, even if it may seem to take too long in the eyes of human expectations and impatience. When in need of help, one may take comfort in the content of the proverb which affirms that it will surely come if God wills it (62). His patience works to our advantage, as another proverb reminds us: 'When God picks up God's stone, God does not throw it at once' (68). He allows people time to change their lives, to change their society for the better welfare of all. Therefore, they should not complain against him: 'When the day has not ended, you do not grumble (complain) against God' (69). They should wait and see that he richly provides for those who walk with him – those who are patient as he is (70).

God is trustworthy and those who put their trust in him are rewarded accordingly in small and big ways. It is said, therefore, in a simple but firm confession of faith that: 'He/she who trusts in God will not spend the night hungry' (God helps those who believe in him) (25). If someone would knock over your cup (your existence), so that its contents are spilled and your very existence looks threatened, you can trust that God will fill it up

again (29). He is to be trusted. He does not fail the one who trusts in him, as another proverb states: 'That which the Lord filled will not fail' (There are always more good things coming from the Lord) (45).

Because God is trustworthy, people put their hope in him. 'Even if the prophet died, to the Lord he remained' (The Lord is the source of hope even in death)' (6). Nothing can separate people from God if they put their hope in him. Even when things look very hard, as for example when one is gravely ill, one can still put one's hope in God (47). Those who hope in him reap the fruits of their hope and trust – they can gather pumpkins (60): their life reaches fulfilment and reward. Even if it means going through trials, it results in a refinement. Therefore 'The word of God (is) like a stone that grinds' (The Lord crushes and refines the spirit of his people) (61). Hope turns hardship into refinement, into another state of being which has also its own purpose.

God is wise (E31)

Wisdom is highly valued in African tradition. It is to be expected that God would be considered wise and omniscient. The fact that he is the Creator and Sustainer of all things is in itself a declaration of his infinite wisdom. Indeed all the other concepts already considered related to and springing from his wisdom. It is expressed in exercising judgement and discernment (between good and evil) (1), in people's dependence on him for their sustenance (2), in solving problems which otherwise seem insoluble (3). He acts with great wisdom in giving gifts and talents to people (13). He cannot and does not sleep – he is always awake, sees and understands everything that goes on and that concerns every particle of his creation (14). Where the door seems closed to people, God opens it in his wisdom. Indeed it is he who closes one way and opens another (20). His wisdom in creation cannot be questioned or criticised, as one proverb confesses: 'I bear my Creator no grudge ...' (27). His wisdom is a healing, a saving wisdom, so that: 'If God gives you sickness, God gives you its cure' (30).

God observes and understands everything in the world of nature at large. Nobody can even cheat the crab, without God knowing it (33). His

wisdom is final, absolute and unchangeable since there is no alternative or replacement to it (38). The granting of individuality to each creature and the giving of names to each one show how deep and wide his wisdom reaches (42). Even if his deeds seem to take shape slowly, they unfold under his wisdom (48) and come to their fruition in due time. Even creatures besides people acknowledge that creation reflects his wisdom and goodness (51). He is the wise architect of creation, so that (symbolically) the house (creation) built by him cannot fall (53) – it has no shortcomings and nothing can undermine it. Through his great wisdom, he sustains and supplies the needs of his creation (58, 59). In his unfathomable wisdom, he refines the essence of human beings (61) without annihilating them. he unfolds what lies in the unknown future, and gives each day its own character and form (69).

Conclusion

This small selection of proverbs about moral and ethical concepts of God shows how effective proverbs are in serving as vehicles of communication, especially in the context of oral tradition. They utter convictions and embody certainties, but leave the door open for further reflection. They are concentrated doses of knowledge, wisdom, speculation, observation, conviction and confession of faith. Some state categorically what God is, and are introduced by mentioning him at the very beginning. In some cases, the statements are conditional – for this reason the proverbs begin with an 'if'.

None of the proverbs has a sustained exposition of particular concepts. It may not be in the nature of proverbs to present argumentations or provide reasons for the convictions they affirm. They are short and easy to memorise. By applying them in particular situations or for specific occasions, they become active, they expand in meaning and outreach. They become like seeds which fill with more life when sown, watered and given light and warmth. Thus this small set of proverbs gives us an insight into African understanding of God, both in his nature and his relation to persons. We have only looked at one aspect, namely the ethical attributes of God. Out of the selected proverbs there emerged a working picture of God as loving,

just, wise, patient and compassionate, among other things. It also emerged that people do not speak of God's ethical attributes in abstract terms or in a vacuum. Rather, these ethical attributes are related to human life and observation. They are in a sense more *applied* attributes of God, and less speculative in nature. In his ethical being, he is actively in the midst of people in their daily life, in their encounter with one another and with nature, in their experiences and hopes. Nobody questions or denies his existence. Belief in him is communal; it is one of the values by which people live. The proverbs which speak about God are not private but public; they belong to the community, to society.

These proverbs could clearly point to an enormous amount of theological and religious concepts about God circulating orally in African societies. They could be compared to colours and brushes which (symbolically) paint a mosaic of God who paradoxically cannot be represented in physical form. It is remarkable that no physical image of God has ever been reported in Africa. However, proverbs would seem to provide us with a valid mental and oral picture of God, and a very wide-angled picture at that. There is more of this mosaic picture of God in the proverbs than has yet been unearthed by scholars. God is more real in African proverbs than seems to be the case in some theological and religious dissertations in the world. And many of the proverbs have a wider circulation and longer duration than some of the dissertations. While dissertations may gather dust in the libraries, proverbs go marching on. But we need both. I hope that they can find room to coexist.

Select proverbs on ethical concepts of God

1 'A man says this is good and that is bad but he knows nothing of the two' (that is only God can judge good and bad) (Maasai 15).
2 'A poor person: (if the Lord) his supports refuses, teeth he lacks' (A poor person absolutely depends on God's gifts: rain, food, tools, etc.) (Oromo 4176).
3 'An issue for which there is no answer: God did not create' (God helps people to resolve all problems) (Oromo 4509).
4 'Any calabash that has got a bottom can stand upright' (The proverb

means that God gives every man what is required by human nature: but it depends on man to exploit such gifts,) (Every man is the architect of his own fortune) (Gikuyu 276).

5 'By the kindness (of God) the house is satisfied' (Through God's kindness the family will be satisfied) (Oromo 2564).

6 'Even if the prophet died, to the Lord he remained' (The Lord is the source of hope even in death) (Oromo 2629).

7 'Gifts from above come, man in vain labours' (Without help from above, one labours in vain) (Oromo 4140).

8 'God because He is, the sun rises' (God is the cause of all) (Oromo 1022).

9 'God does not hurry. (What) He sends to the earth to arrive does not fail' (God's actions are above time and place) (Oromo 756).

10 'God does not like evil' (The Akan associate God with good) (Akan 107).

11 'God has everything; even the Wata have cattle' (The Wata are lower-class people who make pottery) (God loves His creatures and provides for them) (Oromo 1486).

12 '"God help me" helps himself/herself too' (Swahili M39).

13 'God is a donkey rolling (in the dust)' (God does as he wishes; he makes one rich and one poor) (Oromo 1489).

14 'God is not asleep' (This is an expression of the belief that God sees and knows everything and brings everything to book. God's justice is therefore unfailing) (Akan 106).

15 '"God is present", you said, "then don't sleep on the road,"' (God helps those who help themselves) (Oromo 1488).

16 'God lost, but he does not lose forever; a man he puts in a safe place' (God does not abandon a person) (Oromo 1859).

17 'God never listens to the robber' (Maasai 19).

18 'God said: "Go out (of) onto the road and call upon me,"' (God helps those who are trying to walk in the right way) (Oromo 1487).

19 'God speaks a foreign tongue' (Do not torment God's creatures; you will be punished) (Ovambo 32).

20 'God while one way he closes, another way opens' (At times things that appear to be obstacles turn out to be aids) (Oromo 2920).

21 'God's witness is conscience *(ahonim)*' (According to the Akan, it is *ahonim* which tells us when we have done right or wrong, and it is

regarded as that which witnesses to God) (Akan 123).

22 'He has that which divides, that is there is a judge for him, and he will avenge me' (Maasai H2).

23 'He who is ugly is not so because he refused to smear himself with fat' (but rather because he had no fat to smear himself with. We are what God made us) (Gikuyu 480).

24 'He who plants is not he who eats' (Man proposes, God disposes) (Gikuyu 452).

25 'He who trusts in God will not spend the night hungry' (God helps those who believe in him) (Oromo 1730).

26 'Help yourself so that I may help you' (God helps those who help themselves) (Gikuyu 988).

27 'I bear my Creator no grudge, but my lazy parents who turned me to a beggar and expected me to feed them' (Ghana 317).

28 '"I who made this hole (in my ear lobe) will fill it (with an earring). Let him (the Lord) Who made this hole (my mouth) fill it", the woman said as, passing up food, a ring for her ear she bought' (I trust that God who made me, will take care of me) (Oromo 1831).

29 'If God gives you a calabash full of (palm) wine and living man kicks it over, God fills it up again' (When God blesses a person and an evil-minded person or neighbour attempts to thwart it, God continues to bless that person) (Akan 121).

30 'If God gives you sickness, God gives you its cure' (The ancient Akan experienced God's providence and mercy, and expressed them in this proverb) (Akan 111).

31 'If God is weaving for you a rich silk fabric, be patient and do not interrupt his plans, else your fabric may turn into an inferior jute material' (Ghana 316).

32 'If there were not a God *(Nampongo)* in the country, we wanderers would suffer need' (Cf another Ovambo proverb: 'A wanderer does not know whether he/she will meet hardships') (A person on his/her way somewhere does not know whether he/she will return or die there) (Ovambo 1668, cf. 1669).

33 'If you cheat the crab, God sees your buttocks' (To catch crabs, one has to bend and put one's hand into the crab's hole, and as one does this, one's buttocks are exposed. Nothing is hidden from God; all cheating and unkindness that men do to each other are seen by God, Who brings

them to book) (Akan 124).

34 'If you want to form a Farm Clearing Co-operative Society with God, then you better attend his farm first' (and he will reward you with more blessing) (Ghana 160).

35 'It is God who enstools a talented leader as chief and commits the townsmen to his care' (Ghana 333).

36 'It is God who pounds *fufuu* for the one-armed person' (*Fufuu* is the staple food of the Akan. It is made from plantain, cassava or yams. In preparing fufuu, a person boils the food, puts it into a mortar and pounds it with a pestle, normally holding the pestle with both hands. But for the person with only one arm, the proverb suggests that it is God who helps him or her to pound *fufuu*. God, therefore, is the help of the afflicted or handicapped) (Akan 112).

37 'It is impossible to bend the arms of God' (Maasai 14).

38 'Men cannot change God's predestined decision on an issue' (Man proposes, God disposes) (Ghana 67).

39 'Oh God, give me shade and not that of the tree. Originally a woman's prayer for a child, now used for anything desired' (Maasai, 66h).

40 'On God's errands even old women run' (What God wants done can be done by very unlikely people (Oromo 2438).

41 On the spoon already, if God (wishes) it will reach the mouth and enter it' (Without God, something could happen to us at any time, even between spoonfuls) (Oromo 1930).

42 'Since God does not like wickedness (fraud), God gave every creature a name' (God gave each creature a distinctive name as a necessary mark of individuality. Each person is responsible for his or her own deeds and a person cannot be punished for the wickedness of the others. Cf another proverb: 'The lizard does not eat pepper for the frog to have a burning mouth') (Akan 122).

43 'Spirit of the homeless, God of the poor and the rich' (People give God many names because He helps everyone) (Ovambo 492).

44 'That which (the Lord) put aside for the blind person, the one who sees will not take' (Each receives what is meant for him/her) (Oromo 1711).

45 'That which the Lord filled will not fail' (There are always more good things coming from the Lord) (Oromo 2857).

46 'The appetite that is open, God is able to close' (Men should trust God for food) (Oromo 3915).

47 'The beating of God, the strong man breaks and heals' (God punishes and heals) (Oromo 1952).
48 'The deeds of God come slowly' (Unlike men, God works slowly) (Oromo 283)
49 'The God Nampongo has turned a big hunk of firewood towards us, there are sparks in the fire, we will burn' (Ovambo 148).
50 'The good things God did for someone, another person will envy' (People should not be jealous or speak badly of what God did for others) (Oromo 1481).
51 'The hawk says: "All that God has created is good."' (The Akan belief in the goodness of creation is put into the mouth of the hawk, which flies in the skies and beholds the earth below) (Akan 103).
52 'The home of a person runs out (of kindness). In the home of God it never ends' (God is forever kind) (Oromo 2693).
53 'The house that God built does not fall' (God is the proper foundation for a person's life) (Oromo 1743).
54 'The Lord shepherds a person all days, then one day He pulls the man down' (God is dependable until the end) (Oromo 4351).
55 'The man with whom God (travels), the mouse with a stomach full of grain eats' (People who are favoured by God enjoy an abundance) (Oromo 2025).
56 'The man chosen by God is not the one chosen by men' (Maasai 17).
57 'The mother of a brave man is God' (God cares for a courageous person like his/her mother) (Oromo 2126).
58 'The mouth eats because of God and the clouds' (God orders the rain with which a person grows his/her food) (Oromo 2309).
59 'The mouth is God's gourd; he knows what to fill into (it)' (God feeds; men should not worry) (Oromo 2308).
60 'The people of God gather pumpkins' (God cares for the people who hope in him) (Oromo 3194).
61 'The word of God (is) like a stone that grinds' (The Lord crushes and refines the spirit of His people) (Oromo 1417).
62 'There is nothing which can delay help (permanently)' (If God has determined that you will succeed, no matter how long it takes, you will eventually attain your goal) (Maasai 16).
63 'Those who because of God eat, because of man will not spend the night without eating' (People cannot deny to a person what God has

given him/her) (Oromo 2290).

64 'To make the poor full, God kills a (rich man's) cow that gives milk' (One person's loss is another's gain) (Oromo 2595).

65 'To the person who gives, God will give' (God will give something to the person who gives someone else) (Oromo 1475).

66 'What God preserves for the poor does not rot' (Swahili M38).

67 'What is given by God (Kalunga), receive it with both hands' (To take with both hands shows special gratitude) (Ovambo 2154j, several variations).

68 'When God picks up God's stone, God does not throw it at once' (The compassionate God does not hurriedly punish, but God's justice will surely come) (Akan 126).

69 'When the day has not ended, you do not grumble (complain) against God' (Caution against being hasty to complain against God, that he has been unfair to you. God has his own way of doing things. If one exercises patience, one will surely experience God's grace and beneficence) (Akan 110).

70 'Who God (is) with (is) rich' (God is rich and will provide for those who walk with Him) (Oromo 4009).

Themes of ethical concepts of God

E1: Above criticism 13, 27, 35, 50; see also Good, Holy, Perfect

E2: Compassionate, Caring, 16, 19, 28, 29, 30, 31, 36, 43, 44, 54, 57, 60, 68, see also Watchful

E3: Dependable 2, 32, 33, 54, 58, 62, 63, 66. See also Faithful, Reliable

E4: Does not like evil 10, 17, 19, 33, 42; see also Good, Holy, Perfect

E5: Faithful 8, 9, 14, 16, 22, 28, 29, 31, 36, 37, 41, 45, 52, 53, 55, 58, 59, 62, 63, 66; see also Dependable, Reliable, Unchanging, Unfailing

E6: Freedom, gives, allows F. 4, 15, 25, 26, 31

E7: Generous 7, 29, 30, 34, 52, 55, 58, 59, 65, 67, 70; see also Compassionate, Helpful, Kind, Providential

E8: Good 10, 17, 45, 50, 51, 63; see also Above criticism, Holy, Perfect

E9: Helpful, Helper 3, 7, 12, 15, 18, 20, 25, 26, 28, 36, 43; see also

Kind, Providential, Supportive

E10: Holy 10, 17, 27, 37, 38, 42; see also Above Criticism, Good, Perfect

E11: Hope, hoped for, source of 6, 47, 60

E12: Incorruptible 37, 38; see also Faithful, Reliable, Trustworthy

E13: Judge 1, 13, 19, 22, 24, 33, 42, 47, 49, 62; Judges between right and wrong 10, 17, 19, 21; see also Just

E14: Just, Fair, Justice 4, 11, 13, 14, 23, 33, 42, 43, 44, 50, 56, 64, 69; see also Judge

E15: Kind, Kind-hearted 5, 41, 45, 47, 52, 65, 67; see also Generous, Helpful, Providential, Supportive

E16: Love, Loving 11, 19; see also Compassionate, Generous, Providential

E17: Merciful, shows Pity 20, 29, 30, 34, 39

E18: Patient 9, 31, 48, 52, 62, 68, 69

E19: Perfect 10,13, 27, 37, 42, 53; see also Above criticism, Good, Holy

E20: Poor, the: cares for, hears, helps 2, 36, 64, 66; see also Compassion ate, Helpful, Providential, Supportive

E21: Providential 28, 30, 31, 32, 39, 41, 43, 44, 47, 55, 58, 59, 60, 61, 63, 66, 70; see also Compassionate, Helpful, Poor, Supportive

E22: Punishes 22, 47, 49

E23: Reliable 38, 46, 54; see also Dependable, Faithful, Unchanging, Unfailing

E24: Righteous 1, 18, 21, 23, 29, 35, 58; see also Just, Upright

E25: Supportive (to the handicapped, needy, poor, underprivileged) 2, 26, 37, 39, 40, 43, 44, 58, 59, 62, 64, 66, 70; see also Helpful, Kind, Providential

E26: Trustworthy 9, 25, 28, 29, 41, 45, 46. See also Incorruptible, Reliable

E27: Unchanging 8, 37, 38; see also Dependable, Reliable, Unfailing

E28: Unfailing 9, 14, 45, 46, 53, 62; see also Faithful

E29: Upright 1, 35; see also Good, Holy, Just, Perfect, Righteous

E30: Watchful 33, 54; see also Compassionate, Providential

E31: Wise 1, 2, 3, 13, 14, 20, 22, 27, 30, 33, 38, 42, 48, 51, 53, 56, 59, 61, 66, 67, 69

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The African proverb: sacred text in praxis

Joyce Penfield

Theological preface

As a person of faith who believes strongly in a God who longs for all people of the world to live in full humanity and dignity, I need to begin this article with a theological question: How indeed is the study of African proverbs related to the misery and poverty of the masses of people on the African continent? Benezet Bujo (1992), an African theologian, has suggested that Africa's material poverty is deeply rooted in what he terms 'anthropological poverty' brought about by years of colonialism, neocolonialism, and apartheid. Consequently, true African liberation from these systems which have left so much damage on African cultural identity must begin with the rediscovery of deeply rooted traditional African cultural values (Bujo, 1992:10; Martey, 1993:96) and the affirmation of black identity and values (Mudimbe, 1988:151).

African traditional religion is an important ingredient in the definition of an African theology that can move toward 'anthropological dignity' because African traditional religion makes use of the native language; is inseparable from African culture; and plays a central role in African cultural heritage (Martey, 1993:72). Thus, African proverb research can contribute significantly to building an African theology that in turn can have an impact on the social, political, and economic life of the masses. As social scientists, theologians, scholars of religion and anthropologists, our research can make one small contribution toward the development of liberating African theology and theological hermeneutics for the twenty-first century. This article is my attempt to re-examine my original sociolinguistic research from the perspective of world religion and theology to contribute one small step towards an African theology that researches, values and respects African traditional religion.

Purpose

The purpose of this article is to explore the inseparable relationship between language use and religion in Africa or, more specifically, the relationship between African proverbs as used in daily life and African traditional religion. I will utilise Igbo society in south-eastern Nigeria as a case study, drawing on my own sociolinguistic research data as well as ten years of experience in Igbo society as a wife, mother, and teacher trainer. Using this case study and the work done by African theologians and African scholars of traditional religion, I will suggest implications for our understanding of the use of proverbs in African societies in general. I am especially interested in the sacred nature of proverbs and the sacramental aspect of their use.

I want to begin by making two claims about the role of African proverbs in African life. The first is that African proverbs are the sacred texts of African traditional religion and thus are a paradigm for understanding sacred tradition. In fact, they are a significant means by which the sacred is conveyed and maintained in Igbo society. The second claim is that proverbs are sacramental. They do more than reflect the divine; they are the presence of the divine. Because of their association with the ancestors or the 'living dead', proverbs serve as the means by which the spiritual world communicates and interacts with the visible world. Through proverbs, the ancestors or the 'living dead' participate in the daily life of the physical living. In short, I am suggesting that we can regard African proverbs as sacred texts in praxis. But before turning to these two claims, I would like to clarify the theoretical framework on which my discussion of these two claims will rest. Therefore, I will now provide a brief summary of the sociolinguistic framework which I will be using.

Sociolinguistics framework

Decades ago, Westermarck (1930:40) noted: 'Proverbs are not only reflections of life; they also play an active part in it.' As a sociolinguist, I have always been more fascinated by the latter than the former. My prior research sought to describe how Igbo proverbs were used in daily interpersonal communication. More specifically I wanted to understand analytically why proverbs were more powerful than one's own words or 'ordinary

language.' My data consisted of 'folk verbal accounts' as well as comments and interpretations of contextual factors for 380 actual and hypothetical interactional events offered by 35 Igbo respondents which involve 150 different Igbo proverbs.[1]

I would now like to briefly summarise some of the assumptions on which I base my own theory of proverbs. For the sake of brevity, I will only summarise those assumptions which are most relevant to this article. In my examples of Igbo proverbs, to capture the multidimensional aspect of proverbs, I will utilise three different levels of meaning as reflected in the translation of the text of the Igbo proverb. These are the literal meaning, which refers to the basic meaning of the text of the proverb as it stands alone; the interactional meaning, which refers to the message being conveyed to the addressee or others in a given interactional context; and the philosophical meaning, which refers to the abstracted metaphorical cultural meaning which is derived from the literal meaning but extends beyond it.

Assumption #1 The use of proverbs can be placed in the broader frame of reference of 'quoting behaviour' – a particular linguistic resource used for a social purpose:

As one Igbo respondent put it: 'The proverb gives credence to what you are saying; it is quoting the experts.' Jan Mukarovsky (1971), a literary member of the Prague Linguistic Circle, noted that proverbs are used as quotes 'to indicate something the speaker for whatever reason does not wish to say directly'. If we treat the use of proverbs as quoting behaviour, we can begin to discover common linguistic patterns within and across cultures. For example, with the introduction of Christianity and the English language to Igbo society, one finds that biblical sayings, English proverbs, and classical British literature, for example Shakespeare, are quoted in bilingual settings. In addition, cross-cultural data provide another empirical justification for treating the use of proverbs as quoting behaviour. For example, the use of proverbs is prevalent in dealing with conflict or dispute in African societies. Finnegan (1970:398–420) cites numerous African societies which use proverbs and other forms of oral literature in legal proceedings to smooth social friction. In my data, I analysed how proverbs are quoted at the many stages of Igbo conflict for many different reasons, for example to give advice, to mediate a dispute, to reduce tension, to obtain revenge, to sting

an opponent, and to inflame the conflict. Outside the African continent, Daniel (1972) describes the use of African-American proverbs in conflict among African-Americans. But the cross-cultural example which provides the clearest justification for treating proverbs as quotation comes from Georgia in the United States. Greenhouse (1976) has described the use of biblical quotations in a white, suburban Christian community to resolve and control conflicts in much the same way as proverbs are used in Igbo society and perhaps other African societies as well.

Assumption #2 The proverb is tied to its context, yet is also a foreign element in it:

As a wise member of Fante culture once noted: 'There is no proverb without the situation' (Christensen 1958:233). The implication of this part of assumption #2 is that the meaning of the proverb does not reside solely in the text or content of the proverb, but rather in the combination of the text and its interactional context. Without the interactional context, the proverb is ambiguous or even distorted. This explains why, in my data, I commonly found so many examples of the same proverb having so many different social uses and meanings.

According to Mukarovsky's theory of proverbs, the proverb is felt to be an integral part of its context, but its vocabulary, grammatical structure, rhythm, poetic style, and metaphorical quality also mark it as being a foreign element. Its sharp contrast with the surrounding text of 'ordinary language' plays an important psychological role: when the proverb is quoted, it draws the attention of those being addressed and it then poses a mental challenge to them to process this more abstract speech. As one Igbo respondent told me: 'The proverb makes someone think twice. It has an effect that literal words may not have. It puts someone in a line of relaxation to think.'

The foreignness of the proverb in its interactional context also accounts for a sort of 'third party intrusion' which permits the user of the proverb to take an evaluative or even judgemental position without being blamed, since the words come from another, not from him or herself. This is especially important for the data I analysed in which proverbs were used in everyday behaviour with the intent to correct behaviour.

Assumption #3 Proverbs have both internal structure and external functions and the two are integrally related:

The use of proverbs illustrates a basic principle noted by Del Hymes (1964:39), pioneer in the ethnography of communication: 'Language is not everywhere equivalent in role and value.' The reason is that the external functions may differ in each communicative setting. This theoretical point explains why the same proverb can be used in many different situations with very different meanings and purposes – an attribute which confuses any attempt to classify lists of proverbs.

Assumption #3 suggests another paradigm for proverb research. A structural-functional linguistic theory claims that language has both structure – that is the pattern and organisation of the linguistic forms or pieces of a proverb or text – and function, that is the way in which these forms relate to social life as revealed by their usage. Mathiot and Garvin (1975) suggest that language has both immediate and ultimate functions which represent different levels of abstraction. An immediate function may even seem to be in contradiction to the ultimate function.

Assumption #4 Intelligence is defined by and leadership is earned through the skilful quoting of proverbs to manoeuvre others:

The Igbo say *Uka bu nka*. The literal translation would be: 'Speech is an art.' According to my data, the philosophical or abstracted meaning would be that those who don't know the art of speaking are often misunderstood and embarrassed, but those who are skilled in speaking receive prestige. Quoting proverbs appropriately is the epitome of skill in the language and traditions of Igbo culture and therefore highly respected. In the words of one Igbo respondent: 'If you use proverbs, people will sit up and say to themselves, "Oh, he has really got something to say and is intelligent."' In fact, in traditional Igbo society, leadership positions cannot be obtained without skilful ability to quote proverbs in dealing with others. This is partly true because proverbs themselves are so highly valued and partly true because indirect speech is considered a diplomatic tool of the wise. Here is what one respondent suggested: 'People can be elected to be sent out to speak to other groups if they can use proverbs well because the group

knows they wouldn't get them into trouble; the person able to use proverbs can escape being cornered.'

Assumption #5 The degree of authoritativeness of the quotation and the ultimate strength of the quotation are determined by whom the quotation is associated with:

I will once again quote the wisdom of one of my Igbo respondents to explain this assumption and verify it from the Igbo folk conception:

> When you quote, you are saying that what you say should be considered not on the grounds of who is saying it but rather where it came from. You are speaking in terms of what you have learned from reputed authorities. Quoting is documentation and should be listened to because it comes from a more reputable or higher source.

Thus authoritativeness is bestowed on the quotation by virtue of its association with the highly respected authorities of the community – the 'experts'. Even the content of one Igbo proverb alludes to this assumption, so permit me to quote here to give authority to my assumption by citing an Igbo proverb to reinforce my point that quoting as documentation and the author of the quote are closely linked: *Otu nwoke si ony gwara ya okwu na o toro ya, ya agwa ya okwu onye toro ya gwara ya*. (Literal translation: 'A man once said if a person tells him something and claims that it was told to him by his senior, he would quote something from someone who seniored that man'.)

With the theoretical framework I have just proposed as a foundation, I would now like to return to my two claims: that Igbo proverbs are sacred texts; and that quoting Igbo proverbs is often the praxis of the sacred.

Proverbs as sacred texts

To modern and Western thinking, 'scripture' is often equated with 'sacred books'. In fact some scholars of religion have assumed that African traditional religion has no sacred scriptures (Mbiti, 1975). In *Sacred word and sacred text*, Harold Coward (1988) challenges the assumption that

divine revelation comes primarily through written texts and that writing can be trusted more than the spoken word. He reminds us that the traditional experience of written scripture in some of the major religions of the world has come through many years of oral tradition. Before modern times, all religions existed in dominantly oral cultures and oral scripture was passed on through teachers (Kramer 1986). For example, Hinduism takes the art of rhetoric very seriously because the spoken word is believed to have such a holiness to it that distortions or corruption of oral delivery can evoke evil rather than good. 'For the Hindu, it is the spoken sacred word that reveals divine truth and has power to transform one's consciousness' (Coward 1988:ix).

For Jews and Christians, the spoken word is seen as having creative power. In the book of Genesis, it is through the spoken word that God creates heaven and earth. In addition, many Christians believe that it is through oral preaching rather than written interpretation that the living presence of the Holy Spirit functions. These few examples from a variety of religions in the world suggest that the spoken sacred word can have a transformative power over people's lives. This is a very important point from which to begin a discussion of the sacred role of proverbs in African life. Coward (1988:174) makes two points which will be very helpful in examining this topic: the spoken word in a relational context can effectively evoke the divine; and some spoken words have more evocative power than others (Coward 1988:174).

What, then are the criteria we might use for 'sacred text'? Smart and Hecht (1982) define sacred literature as both oral and written and as texts which are believed to have divine origin, power and influence. They hold special authority for the community which uses them. They are a community's officially accepted corpus or 'sacred canon'. They express insights by holy people, often about right ways to live; they often teach orthodox standards and practices for behaviour. Consequently sacred texts carry power, status and authority in their given communities. From a sociolinguistic perspective, we might say that sacred texts 'make present insight in a way that other words cannot' (Kramer 1986).

Using the above criteria, it is quite easy to argue that African proverbs can be considered sacred texts in African traditional religion. They repre-

sent a community's officially accepted corpus or 'sacred canon'; by their nature, they are associated with the authority of tradition; they are the believing community's final authority in sacred and secular affairs; they teach orthodox standards and practices; they are holy and inspired; and they are approached with reverence and awe (Kramer 1986). They thus have all the potential of a sacred text.

Proverbs have a great deal of authoritativeness in Igbo society because they are believed to have originated from the elders – those who most skilfully followed the traditions of the society. Elders represent the highest living traditional authority and are often associated with settling disputes between and within villages. Ottenberg (1971:160) characterises them as verbally aggressive, skilled public speakers, and good at manipulating others. When they die, elders pass on to a new existence in the spiritual world and become ancestors. Ancestors, thus, are those who had good reputations in the visible world and are associated with good rather than evil spirits. Proverbs are thus the symbolic means by which the ancestors continue to participate authoritatively in present-day Igbo life.

According to Emefie Metuh (1985) the Igbo worldview is composed of the visible and the invisible world – two levels of existence which form one fluid coherent unit in which spirits (the invisible world) and human beings, plants, animals, and other material beings (the visible world) are in continuous interaction. The universe is like a spider's web in which beings from both these worlds are linked together in a network of interdependent relationships. Not surprisingly, one then finds much concern in Igbo society for maintaining harmonious relationships in the community. Harmony and order are believed to lead to health, prosperity and good status for members of the community, while bad relations and disorder lead to the opposite.

Ancestors play a very significant role in the Igbo worldview. They are the elders who at physical death enter *ala mmuo* – the land of the spirits, which is literally in the ground directly under their living kin. They live there as spirits until they are reincarnated and become part of the visible world once again. The ancestors make up part of the invisible or spiritual Igbo world, which also consists of a variety of deities such as the sun, the sky, thunder, and earth; spirits which were never human; evil spirits of the dead; *Chi* – one's own personal and individual deity; and of course,

Chukwu – the Supreme deity or the Creator or what Western world might refer to as God (Metuh 1981).

The ancestors occupy a special place in Igbo religious practice. They are viewed as the members of the spiritual world who are closest to the living. Perhaps this explains why some refer to them as the 'living dead'. In fact, the ancestors receive more attention in daily remembrance than the other deities and even more than *Chukwu* – the Creator. In any case, the ancestors serve as intermediaries between the living and other spiritual beings. They have a relationship of mutual responsibility with the living. The living must honour and remember them, feed them, and obey *omenala* – the laws and tradition of the society. The ancestors in turn protect the community from wicked spirits, guard over morality by making sure that *omenala* is obeyed by the living, and act as intermediaries between *Chukwu* – the Creator – and the living. The ancestors hold tremendous power in the lives of the living. They can intervene in the lives of the living to bring order and harmony when there is discord and they can also upset human order when their laws are not obeyed (Metuh 1985).

The ancestors are the primary stewards of morality in Igbo society, but they are aided by an important deity – *ala* or what I would translate as mother earth. When elders die, their bodies are buried under their living relatives. In fact, it is common practice to bury one's father in the bedroom of the eldest living son in the village. Therefore, the body of the elders returns to *ala* – the earth. *Ala* is the custodian of customs, traditions, and public morality. Her job is to sanction disputes and offences committed by the living and to punish offenders. Thus, the ancestors assist *ala* in protecting *omenala,* 'laws of the land' which consist of the traditional laws, customs and moral code. The Igbo say: *Ogba oso anaghi agba ghara ihu ala* (Literal translation: 'Wherever you run, there is nowhere you don't touch the ground') (Philosophical translation: The ancestors and the sacred ground *(ala)* know whatever you do).

Obviously, in Igbo traditional religion the ancestors hold divine power. If proverbs are associated with them, it is easy to understand why proverbs hold the power and prestige that they do. I would like to suggest that we can think of the texts of proverbs as the speech of the ancestors which enters into the daily life of the living through quoting behaviour.

Praxis of the sacred

A second major point I would like to make in this article is that in Igbo society the rhetorical use of the proverb is the praxis of the sacred. Proverbs are the key means by which the 'living dead' participate in the daily life of the living. In Igbo culture the divine beings play an active role in daily life through the message of the text of the proverb, but also through its use in interpersonal and social interaction with other members of the community. The difference between the two is more than a minor distinction. My own research suggests that once you remove the proverb from its context of use, the praxis of its sacred action has been silenced. According to an Igbo proverb: 'The proverb has no life apart from its context.'

How do then proverbs play a part in the praxis of the ancestors? Since the moral code and ethical principles of *omenala* are not written down, proverbs and other forms of oral tradition serve to encode and enact these very sacred principles in the life of Igbo society. Proverbs are quoted in both ritualistic and non-ritualistic settings. Nwoga (1975) has noted that they are used rhetorically in one of two ways: to illuminate or to correct. These are basically two different speech acts. Illuminative usage is what we call in speech act theory 'locution'. It is a simple referential statement that reinforces a point. In Igbo society proverbs used in public speaking often have an illuminative usage. They serve the function of reminding the community of *omenala* – the traditional customs and moral standards that are to be followed. Proverbs used as corrective usage are illocutionary; they are not simply making a referential statement but are calling on divine authority to manage or direct the actions of another. And as such I would suggest that to the Igbo community they are not merely the echo of the divine, they are the praxis of the ancestors in the lives of the living. Few community members are willing to argue with the ancestors or disobey them.

So far I might have given the impression that illocutionary or corrective usage of proverbs is used only by those who live traditionally and practise Igbo traditional religion exclusively. However, my data revealed that even what one might refer to as 'old proverbs', – proverbs with archaic forms or customs – are used in modern-day settings by those who officially consider themselves Christians. I will offer one sample of many examples from my

data to illustrate this point. The following is a folk verbal account of a modern-day interactional context in which an archaic Igbo proverb was used as a corrective. It was narrated to me by two female students at Alvan Ikoku College of Education where I taught.

> Adaego was attending a teacher training college. She was married but since the college was far from her home, she lived on campus in a room which she shared with her friend, Chinwe. Adaego studied with other male students and was seen often in their company. One day her friend and roommate, Chinwe, told her: 'Adaego, you are always with these boys: *Wepu aka enwe n'ọfe, na o di ka aka mmadu.*' Adaego thought about her friend's advice and decided to keep less company with male friends from that time on.

The literal translation of the proverb quoted in this interactional context is: 'Remove the hand of a monkey from your stew because it might be taken for a human's hand.' The philosophical translation is: An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. The interactional translation is: People will begin to think you are having sexual relations if you keep hanging around these male students.

In the traditional Igbo worldview, Igbo morality is linked to the ontological order established by *Chukwu* – the Creator. This worldview assumed that nature has its own rhythm and logic and this order is ruled by fixed laws – *omenala*. The maintenance of harmony in this ontological order is an overriding concern in Igbo society. The corrective usage of proverbs and the focus of Igbo society on peace and harmony share at least three similarities with the ancient Wisdom tradition as reflected in the books of Proverbs, Job, Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiastes, and Sirach (Ecclesiasticus) in the Bible. First, according to Von Rad (1972:62), Wisdom tradition holds that there is a fundamental harmony and order in the universe which was put there by God and that if human beings live in 'right relationship' with each other, nature and God, there will be harmony and peace. Second, speech plays an important role in this process, for the wise know when to speak and when to be silent; they also know how to use speech to affect the outcome which is to say they are skilled in illocutionary acts. To be wise means to use speech eloquently to others in such a way that you restore or maintain

peaceful order. And third, Wisdom tradition depends on sayings, proverbs and other oral traditions to specify the moral code which is to guide the wise in making decisions. Much like oral literature in the Wisdom tradition, proverbs in Igbo society are sacred quotes which serve as significant rhetorical tools to remind the community of its moral code and to force them to correct their profane behaviour so that the ontological order might be maintained and the society might have peace, happiness, and prosperity.

Since the ancestors and *ala* – the earth deity – are the major guardians of public morality in Igbo society, any speech form closely associated with them or their concerns would be extremely powerful in the lives of the living. As already mentioned, proverbs are believed to have originated from those wise, old, good people of the community who became ancestors as they entered a different level of existence. In conclusion, I have attempted to argue in this article that proverbs are powerful verbal tools because the content and form of their text echoes the 'sacred' words of the ancestors and because their illocutionary use in context lives out the praxis of the sacred.

Notes

1 For a more detailed description of this study, the theoretical framework, the methodology or the analysis of data, see *Communicating with quotes: the Igbo case* (Panfield 1983), as well as Penfield 1981, 1982, and Duru & Penfield 1988.

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Are African proverbs an ambiguous source of wisdom for living? A case study of Ga and Dangme proverbs[1]

J N Kudadjie

Introduction

Existentialist philosophers have observed that we as humans are born, thrown into this world, and have to create for ourselves the authentic meaning of life. In doing this, asserts Kierkegaard (commonly regarded as the father of existentialism), we find ourselves between being angels and being devils. To find our proper position between the two poles as human (or, we may say, humane) beings is a task that each of us must perform. Other thinkers teach that we are created by a personal God who has given us knowledge of how to live, and has also empowered us in diverse ways to live a noble and responsible life. There are still several other views. Whichever way we understand human existence and life, what cannot be disputed is that from time immemorial, human societies as well as individuals have endeavoured to find ways to fulfil that task of living authentic, responsible and noble lives. What they found they have internalised, lived out, accumulated into mores and values, and have passed on to succeeding generations to guide them in their day-to-day living.

The people of every race or culture have their own modes of preserving and communicating their values among themselves, for example song, art, sculpture, and drumming. But by far the most commonly used mode is verbal language. There are different forms of verbal language: common language, idiom, secret or esoteric language, and the proverb. In this article we shall show how sage philosophers among the Ga and Dangme[2] of Ghana use proverbs to teach how to live successful lives, at least in their situation. But first, some words on Ga and Dangme proverbs.

Some features of Ga and Dangme proverbs

Ga and Dangme proverbs, like those of other African traditional societies, are attributed to the ancestors. Like all other proverbs the world over, they

are usually short sayings, although there are a few long ones. Among the Ga and Dangme, as in many African societies, when a proverb is cited, it is preceded with a statement such as: 'So said the elders ...' This may be a way of according authority to proverbs. It is also a way of saying that all the people own the proverbs (Dzobo 1975), and that they contain experience, wisdom, and valid counsel which are to be acknowledged by all. Proverbs in current use contain the experiences and wisdom of the people of old. But even today new proverbs are composed by those who are observant, experienced, thoughtful and creative. The experiences and wise advice contained in the proverbs are derived from observations of the nature and behaviour of human beings, animals, birds, plants, and other natural as well as supernatural objects and beings.

The proverbs touch on all conditions of life: wealth and poverty, health and sickness, joy and sorrow; occupations: farming, hunting, fishing, building, trading, and so on; and other kinds of activity: healing, cooking, walking, sleeping, marriage, childbearing, upbringing, etc. There are proverbs which speak about and to all manner of people: kings and citizens, nobles and slaves, women and men, children and adults, apprentices and master craftsmen, and so on. Some of the proverbs state facts from the history, customs and practices of the Ga and Dangme. Others express their philosophical thoughts, their religious beliefs, and their values. Still others reflect the social structure of the traditional society. For example, there are proverbs that suggest how to deal with elders, children, or a spouse, and there are some which indicate the position and role of various members of the society. The Ga proverb, 'When a woman rears a goat, it is a man who slaughters it', shows the position and role of the woman in Ga traditional society as a subordinate (not inferior) but indispensable companion and partner of the man. Similarly, the Dangme proverb 'The streamside drinking gourd does not make one die of thirst' (that is, it saves one from dying of thirst) shows the importance of women in the created order, for it means that a man who has a wife at home will not die of hunger. At a deeper level, it means that a man finds his complement, his fulfilment, in woman, a wife.

The statements made in the proverbs reflect true everyday occurrences. They usually have two meanings: the literal or primary meaning, and the deeper or real meaning. This is precisely why they are called proverbs. For instance, the Ghanaian Akan, Dangme and Ga expression for 'to cite a

proverb', *bu abë*, means 'to bend', 'curve', or 'twist words', to make them complicated (Yankah 1986). Take, for example, the Ga proverb *Kë onyië shuö sëë lë owuuu bö* ('If you follow in the trail of an elephant, you do not get smeared with the dew'). The statement is literally true. The elephant is a very big animal, and as it goes through the forest stepping on the grass and destroying the shrubs, it gets smeared with the dew. Therefore, if you follow in its trail, you stand less risk of getting smeared with the dew, since the elephant has already wiped it off the grass and shrubs. But the proverb has a real or deeper meaning: if you associate with an important personality, say, a rich or knowledgeable or powerful person, you will not lack anything. It can also be applied to mean that if you believe and trust in God, you will not be disappointed but will succeed.

To understand a proverb correctly is a task which calls for discernment; for those who hear the proverbs do not always understand them. This is because the truths and advice expressed in the proverbs are not always stated in plain common language but in figures of speech, metaphors and images. Sometimes things that are alike or opposites are compared and contrasted. One needs to reason and use the imagination to derive their real meaning (Dzobo 1972). This feature of proverbs having both a literal and a deeper meaning sometimes makes it difficult to distinguish them from sayings, idioms, riddles and puzzles. In particular, it seems there is no cut and dried line between proverbs and sayings. All of these have hidden meanings and are difficult to understand. Nevertheless, it is possible to distinguish one from the other. One of the main differences between them lies in how they are used. Riddles and puzzles are usually cited for fun and entertainment, but not so with proverbs. Proverbs are cited in serious discourse. Again, among the Dangme and Ga, the words or sounds used in a puzzle are often onomatopoeic; that is to say, they sound like or describe the thing talked about in the puzzle. Idioms are usually used in public when it is impolite or indecent to say something in plain words; in such cases similes or idioms (euphemisms) are used to make it respectable. For example, you may not say that one is a thief, but you can say (literally in Ga) that his hands pick things. Perhaps the most important difference between these other forms of speech and proverbs is that every proverb contains some wisdom and good advice. Take, the Ga proverb: 'If cotton wool is in your anus, you do not jump over fire.' It has to do with temptation and discre-

tion; it warns against foolishly exposing yourself to things that will ruin you.

Another important feature of Ga and Dangme proverbs, like other African proverbs, is that for a proverb to be appropriate when cited, the situation depicted in the primary meaning as well as its deeper meaning must match that of the context and situation to which it is being applied (Plissart 1976). As in other traditional African societies, the Ga and Dangme use proverbs for a variety of purposes, one of which is to embellish speech or, as it were, to sweeten it in order to communicate effectively. As one Ga writer (Nee-Adjabeng Ankra 1966) put it, speaking without citing proverbs is like eating soup without salt. Proverbs are also cited to confirm, reinforce or modify a statement, or to heighten and attract attention to a point or message; or simply to summarise a speech. Sometimes, too, they are used to communicate a fact or opinion which might be impolite or even offensive to state in direct speech or plain language. They are also used to make people appreciate speech, facilitate understanding, and lead to conviction.

Although all these uses are important, they are, in fact, the means to an end. The ultimate purpose of proverbs is to impart wisdom, teach good moral and social values, warn against foolish acts, provide a guide to good conduct, influence people's conduct, and help them to succeed in life.

Ga and Dangme proverbs, like proverbs the world over, can be extremely useful and effective for all the things they can be used for, particularly as a tool for teaching moral and social values, and for conducting oneself successfully in the business of life. They are short and not easily forgotten. They are also popular for their humour. Moreover, they provoke vivid images in the mind, such that things that are otherwise abstract and difficult to grasp become relatively easy to understand. Proverbs therefore have the power to change people's conduct, because the truths portrayed in them are so plain that those who understand the morals and advice they contain feel compelled to conduct their lives in the manner prescribed in the proverbs by the wise elders. For when a proverb is used correctly, it speaks to the intellect, the soul and the heart – that is, to the understanding, the feelings and the will (see also Archbishop Trench in Malcolm 1949). Over the centuries proverbs, including Ga and Dangme proverbs, have done this successfully.

Ga and Dangme proverbs have thus proved to be a veritable source of wisdom for living not only in ancient times but also in contemporary times. There can be little doubt, therefore, that they will also be a veritable source of wisdom for living in the twenty-first century.

Ga and Dangme proverbs as a repository of wisdom for living

In this section we summarise the experiences, observations and counsels of the sages on selected aspects of how to live wisely and successfully. We also state examples of proverbs that preserve and teach such wisdom.

Making the correct use of opportunity and acting appropriately

One should make maximum use of opportunity, avoid procrastination, refrain from what one cannot do, and do well what one can do. This is stated in proverbs such as:

Këji onine shë Akle nö lë ogbeö lë nyöñlo (Ga) ('If you lay hands on the animal of your hunt, you do not allow it to escape but kill it right away').

Kuöwi (ovönö) ke në Mawu bö lë sibulö he je ö e dë si ngë e nane nö se si në ebuu (Dangme) ('The frog says, since God created it to squat, it never stands on its legs but only squats').

Circumspection, cautiousness and discretion

Life is full of dangers; therefore, one should be circumspect, cautious and discreet, in order to avoid pitfalls that so often bring unnecessary trouble and pain to the unwary:

Kë odonti yë odunaa lë ohuruuu otëkeee la (Ga) ('If cotton wool is in your anus, you do not jump over fire').

Ke o yë Nakonyë we mi ö, o be Nakonyë pa he fu nuë (Dangme) ('If you do not go to Nako-mother's house, you will not smell the foul smell of Nako-mother's sore').

On virtues

Society is built on all kinds of commendable virtues. All must cultivate these, if society is to progress. Such virtues include: fortitude, generosity, hard work, honesty, humility, patience, perseverance, and taking one step at a time:

'Aekoo' hi fe 'Sëë fêê' (Ga) ('To be told "Well done" is better than "How was back?').

Kposuö ke hesibami hu hi, se lë ngua në ö tatu gbee lë (Dangme) ('The elephant says it is good to be humble, for huge as it is, a tiny ant kills it').

On vices

Vices destroy both individual and community life. Each person should eschew cultivating bad character traits and habits such as greed or selfishness, hardheartedness, haste, hypocrisy, ingratitude, laziness, pretence, pride and treachery.

Akë hiñmëii enyö kwëëë tö mli (Ga) ('You do not look inside a bottle with both eyes').

Ali nö piani në a suu kane gbökuë kë hyëë e hë mi (Dangme) ('You do not know a fellow during the day and light a lamp at night to identify him').

Contentment

It is wise not to indulge in greedy clamour for bigger things; instead, one must be contented with small beginnings, and hold in high esteem whatever is one's own.

Böböyo hi nya mi në a kpaa anyagba (Dangme) ('You do not whistle when there is a morsel in your mouth').

Nö ko je we e muö nine ngö tsöö we e je blö (Dangme) and *Mö ko kë ebëku etsöööö etsëmëi awe* (Ga) ('No one uses his left hand to point to his

father's home') (In Dangme and Ga culture, the left hand is associated with what is dishonorable, contemptible and worthless).

Being calm and letting things take their natural course

Life is full of vagaries, uncertainties and disappointments. Therefore, it pays to remain calm and trust nature to take its course, instead of seeking to have one's own way in everything. Those who desire to be able to cope with the ups and downs of life, and to live peaceful and victorious lives must be aware of such facts of life.

Këji nu në lë, etsöö enaamöhe (Ga) ('When it rains, the rainwater itself reveals safe spots').

Against worrying or being too certain about the future

Since the future is unknown to human beings and can bring changes in one's fortunes, one should not be too certain about the way things will turn out; yet, one need not worry unduly.

Anuuu nu atooo Aharabata (Ga) ('One does not drink water in anticipation of Harmattan drought').

Je ngë se kë nya (Dangme) ('The world (or life) is backwards and forwards').

Respect for experience and the elderly

Past experience is invaluable for success in the present and future. Elderly people have a wealth of experience. Youth ought to respect and learn from them. To heed the advice of the elderly is to find success and life; to ignore it is to court failure and death. The current attitude and saying that 'the wisdom of Solomon has nothing to do with the age of Methuselah' is not the common view of African societies or, for that matter, the Ga and Dangme.

Onukpa leee nö ko lë ele wödöi wöö (Ga) ('If an old person knows nothing at all, he knows how to slumber').

Kpêni tui hungmë se buömi blema munyu (Dangme) ('The beard does not tell the eyebrow ancient stories' - for before the beard grew, the eyebrow was!).

God's providence and care

Life in Dangme and Ga society is often harsh, and many a person experiences helplessness and hopelessness. But there is trust in God's providence and care. It is believed that the sovereign God (*Nyingmo* or *Ataa Naa Nyöñmö)* can overrule, and that if he allows someone to encounter a problem or be given some heavy responsibility, he also gives the grace and ability to bear or discharge it.

Kë Nyöñmö tere bo jatsu lë, ehaa bo tako (Ga) ('When God gives you a load He also gives you a soft pad' [to carry it]).

Beni ahuko Lañma tëi anö lë jëi aduji lë yeö nii (Ga) ('Before Lañma' (that is, a stony hilly area on the western boundary of Ga land) 'was cultivated the monkeys that lived there had food to eat').

These expressions of trust in God may be said to be summarised in the Dangme proverb, *Mëmëëmë të ngo buë mi.* ('The salty taste never ceases in a salt-pot.') One of the meanings of this proverb is that God's grace and mercy towards humankind never cease, for loving kindness is of the very essence of God.

Ambiguity of proverbs as source of wisdom for living

The above proverbs demonstrate that they can make a person wise. However, as one observes the occasions on which proverbs are cited and for what purposes, it strikes one that proverbs are not a source of monolithic counsel on what to do or not do; for it soon becomes apparent that for virtually every proverb there is another which teaches the very opposite.

Witness the following examples.

A Circumspection/cautiousness versus B Sacrifice/risk taking

A.1 *Aniyo moo le o he nö yë mi' pi fö* (Dangme) ('Take care, little bird" does not mean one is a coward').

A.2 *Kë odonti yë odunaa lë ohuruuu otëkeee la* (Ga) ('If you have cotton wool in your anus, you do not jump over fire').

B.1 *Nö në maa si ngë bö nö ö e be sa mi* (Dangme) ('That which is left in the dew does not go bad').

B.2 *Kë okëë ekañala lë ebeee* (Ga) ('If you say it should not be charred, it will not be well-cooked').

A Vigilance versus B Relaxing

A.1 *Nö ko tlo we la në e hwöö mahe* (Dangme). ('No one carries fire and falls asleep').

B.1 *Ke atloo tu tsopa po a slëö taabë* (Dangme) ('Even when carrying gun powder one can smoke a pipe').

A Acting immediately versus B Taking one's time over something/ patience

A.1 *Këji onine shë Akle no lë ogbeö lë nyönlo* (Ga) ('If you find the game of your chase, you kill it at once').

A.2 *Kë nu tsë yë tö mli lë eshaa* (Ga) ('If water is kept long in a gourd [or bottle], it goes bad').

B.1 *Bëlëoo adodoñ fee ni eye gbee toi* (Ga) ('It is little by little that the fly ate the dog's ear').

B.2 *Akë gidigidi yeee sane* (Ga) ('You do not prosecute [or settle] a

case in haste').

A Not worrying about the future versus B Preparing for the future

A.1 *Anuuu nu atooo Aharabata* (Ga) ('You do not drink water in anticipation of the Harmattan').

A.2 *Ayi yë nya ngë zu mi* (Dangme) ('You do not haggle over the price of yam when it is still in the ground' (that is, yet to be harvested)).

B.1 *He waomo hewö atoö waonaa* (Ga) ('It is because of the need to scratch oneself that one grows finger nails').

B.2 *Piani kuma he në ayaa mötu pa ngë* (Dangme) ('It is because of afternoon thirst that you fetch water in the morning').

A Co-operation and community versus B Self-reliance and individualism

A.1 *Nine kake nui ngmo* (Dangme) ('One finger (or hand) does not (cannot) catch lice').

B.1 *Apletsi ke e nyë lë a he se pi lë* (Dangme) ('The goat says it is its mother that was bought and not itself').

A Corporate responsibility versus B Individual responsibility

A.1 *Ke e yi ö e saa nya nö he* (Dangme) ('When it (a container) is full it (the contents) smears the lid').

B.1 *Nö ko kpe we jitöböwie në nö kpa nya mi saa lë* (Dangme) ('No one chews 'West African hot black pepper' for someone else to feel the hotness in his mouth').

A Respect for old traditions versus Need for change/Discarding old traditions

A.1 *Blema kpaa nö atsaa* (Ga) ('You weave a rope on the pattern of the ancient rope').

B.1 *Akë blema ñme ehooo wonu* (Ga) ('You do not cook soup with ancient (that is old) palmnuts').

The above examples clearly illustrate the ambiguity – or, rather, apparent ambiguity or conflict – in the counsel contained in proverbs. The following questions arise. Are African, and for that matter Ga and Dangme, proverbs an ambiguous source of wisdom for living? Are the ambiguities and conflicts real? To the extent that there are ambiguities and conflicts can they be removed?

We formulate a few possible solutions and examine each briefly. In the process, we shall also discuss the reality or otherwise of the alleged contradictions.

Resolving the conflict: logical solutions

- *Denying contradictions*

In logic, when inconsistent statements occur in an argument there are procedures for dealing with them. For example, the statement 'This article is white and it is not white' contradicts itself. To remove the contradiction, one will have to deny or reject one or the other of the two conflicting claims, namely 'This article is white' and 'it is not white.' Or one may reject the whole statement. It is tempting to want to use this procedure to resolve a resulting conflict when proverbs contradict each other. In the case of proverbs, one may reject one or the other, or all of them. But this kind of solution will not do for proverbs deal with real-life situations and not merely theory or logical consistency.

- *Re-interpretation*

A more promising approach is re-interpretation. Here one may retain the conflicting proverbs but re-interpret them in such a way that the meanings are harmonised and the conflict is removed. This kind of solution has been used with so-called 'problem of evil', where it is possible to defend theistic claims and acknowledge the fact of evil, yet maintain that there is

no logical problem.[3]

- *Multiple-meaning principle*

A variation of the re-interpretation solution is the resort to what one may call 'the multiple-meaning principle.' The key here is that one proverb can have several meanings and can, therefore, be applied in different situations. For instance, the Ga proverb, 'If you want to send a message to God, tell it to the wind', can be used in different situations to teach that God is everywhere: to teach one the correct Ga procedure that if you want to see the chief, you must first see the linguist; or to advise that if you have a bothersome matter that you cannot speak out, you have to tell it to those who can pass it on. Thus, where there seems to be a conflict, one may be able to solve the problem by resorting to some of the many different meanings that may suit the occasion and purpose as well as be in harmony with other proverbs cited for that occasion.

On the other hand, many different proverbs may teach the same moral lesson, and can thus be used for emphasis. The Ga say: 'A bad fellow is better than an empty home.' They also say that: 'A leaking kitchen is better than a thicket.' The Dangme say: 'Mud-water also can be used to quench fire.' Although their texts differ, the proverbs are not contrary; in fact, they are equivalent. They have the same meaning; they teach the same moral lesson, namely, that every person is of some use; therefore, everyone should be given due respect, and people should have a sense of their own worth and be contented with what they are. Because the three proverbs literally and textually say different things, this does not mean that they are also semantically different. The message of a proverb must be sought in its real (that is, deeper) meaning, rather than its literal one. If this caution about semantics is heeded, it will help in detecting and dealing with inconsistencies.

In our opinion, the re-interpretation and multiple-meaning approaches hold some prospect of solving the apparent conflict in proverbs. But they are not the best; for they, too, are a kind of logical solution.

Resolving the conflict: situational and contextual approaches

- *The principle of non-importation*

Another way of handling the problem of ambiguity in proverbial wisdom and of avoiding conflicts in the counsel stated in proverbs is to refrain from importing proverbs from one cultural context into another. Consider the proverbs 'Too many cooks spoil the broth' (English proverb) and 'Many fishes do not spoil the broth' (Ga proverb). Even though they are similar in structure and contain common key words and concepts, they are actually opposites. In one case, the proverb (English) is saying that the more people or different approaches you use in tackling an issue, the more likely you are to end up in confusion and failure. In the other (Ga), the lesson is that the more people or different approaches you use in tackling an issue, the more likely you are to succeed. It is not uncommon to find people use the English proverb to counter the Ga proverb in order to demonstrate that proverbs do contradict each other. If a contradiction occurs because of the importation of a foreign proverb, we suggest that the conflict be resolved by rejecting the imported proverb, not the local proverb, not so much because it is foreign, but because its (original) context may be quite different from that of the issue and context for which the proverb is being cited. For example, in contemporary English culture where individualism is the preferred attitude, it is understandable that free communal effort (probably regarded as interference) may be frowned upon. In contrast, in Ga society communalism is the preferred attitude; hence the practice of many people doing things together cannot be bad.

- *The situational approach*

By far the best approach in dealing with the problem of apparent abiguity or conflict is what we would call 'the situational approach'. It would seem that in most cases it is only a cursory examination that suggests that some proverbs contradict others: a deeper examination may lead to a different conclusion. For example, some proverbs counsel self-reliance, while others counsel community effort. The truth, however, is that in their own contexts and particular situations, each proverb is apt. In real life situations, too, there are paradoxes and apparent contradictions. For instance, a seed may die in order to germinate, and in certain situations the best thing to do is to be silent, while in others speaking out is the wise thing to do. Thus, although silence and speaking out may appear to conflict when put together, in the appropriate contexts, each is positive. Again, in most

decision-making situations, there are several choices, some of which conflict with each other. It is no wonder, then, that since proverbs relate to real life situations, they sometimes seem to conflict with each other. However, a closer examination would show that these are only apparent and not real contradictions; for in the same situation and from the same perspective, only one counsel will usually be given. This fact underscores the need to use proverbs in the right context and appropriate situation. If the situational approach is adopted, most, if not all, of what appears to be ambiguous or contradictory at first sight may be resolved.

Some of the observations made above have been echoed in various forms by other scholars.[4] Some contend that contradictions in proverbs are only apparent, never real. Others hold that there is no contradiction in the proverbs themselves, but only in their use. For this reason, they urge, one has to consider the real meaning of the proverb and not just the text. To get at the real meaning of proverbs, a complex number of factors have to be taken into account, such as the occasion, purpose, context and situation of use as well as the mood and attitude of the person citing the proverb. It has also been held that if one examines meanings carefully, one finds that in a given situation, only one proverb would be suitable. In our opinion, this last claim is plausible but cannot be upheld in all cases; for it is conceivable that the same situation can – and in fact does – generate more than one proverb, even opposites.

On the basis of the features and content of Ga and Dangme proverbs as stated in the foregoing presentation, we would draw the following conclusions.

Conclusion

As has been shown, Ga and Dangme proverbs are a real mine for those who desire to have wisdom and to know what attitudes to have or what to do in life's varied situations. However, the untutored may take the wrong counsel, if they do not go to the right proverb. They may choose to follow a saying that applies to the opposite situation. Where proverbs seem to be giving conflicting counsel, one must therefore consider their proper context, for it is the situation that determines the meaning of a proverb. Generally

speaking, what look like contradictions are only apparent and not real. However, there may be exceptions, so that after every effort has been made to remove apparent contradictions, some real contradictions may remain unresolved. This is not strange, for there are paradoxes in life itself, and pain remains in spite of the best human efforts to increase goodness and remove pain. While we must endeavour to work at harmony, we must remember we are finite and cannot solve all problems.[5]

The possibility of failure to resolve any contradictions, real or apparent, which a set of proverbs may present, teaches another important lesson: namely, that there are many sides to things in real-life situations. We need not be unduly worried about contradictions; for there are paradoxes in life itself. To counsel one in paradoxical situations, one may sometimes use proverbs that are or appear contradictory. But this does not detract from the fact that proverbs are a source of wisdom for living. Thus, even contradiction is evidence of wisdom.[6] As one Dangme proverb says, *Agama ke, `Mlamla hu hi në blëoblëo hu hi.'* ('The chameleon says: "Swiftness is good and slowness is also good"'). It is, indeed, good to do something quickly but at times it is best to take one's time over something. Knowing when and when not, what and what not in particular situations is the wisdom that the sages, through Ga and Dangme proverbs, promise to teach. Those who heed their good counsel will find wisdom to guide them to live successfully now and in the twenty-first century, as people who heeded their wise counsel have done throughout the ages.

Notes

1 A good deal of the material in sections II and III of this article is from the manuscript of my book in progress, Ga and Dangme proverbs for preaching and teaching, to be published under the African Proverbs Project 1993–1996.

2 The Ga and Dangme live in the south-eastern corner of Ghana. They are two separate ethnic groups with many similarities in their cultural outlook. Sometimes they are regarded as a twin ethnic group and referred to as the Ga-Adangme. Their languages, Ga and Dangme, are related but not mutually intelligible. Together, the Ga and Dangme form about 13 per cent of the population of Ghana.

3 The claims that are said to constitute the problem are:

- God is all-powerful.
- God is all-loving.
- God created and governs the world.
- There is evil in the world.

It is possible to argue that being all-powerful and all-loving does not necessarily mean removing all so-called evil. It is also possible to show that what is sometimes called evil is not really evil but has instrumental goodness. Thus God's attributes and his relationship with the world are not necessarily incompatible with the fact of evil in the world.

4 These views were expressed by participants at the symposium.

5 I owe this admission of the reality of unresolved contradictions to some participants at the symposium, in particular to Prof Heinz Kimmerle.

6 This observation is owed to Prof K Asare Opoku.

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Proverbs about God and the divinities in the religion of the Akan of Ghana

Kofi Asare Opoku

Introduction

The Akan constitute the largest ethnic group in Ghana and their language (Twi-Fante) is the lingua franca of the country with English as the official language. The Akan inhabit the forest belt as well as some of the coastal areas in the central and western parts of the country. The Akan are mostly farmers raising such food crops as yams, cassava, ground nuts, plantains, cocoyams, corn, pineapples and sweet potatoes. Cocoa, coffee and copra are among the commercial crops cultivated by the Akan for export. Fishing is also an important occupation among those who live along the coast and some of the big rivers. There is a highly developed artistic tradition which expresses itself in the weaving of *kente* cloth, the printing of *adinkra* cloth, the carving of stools and drums as well as the making of pottery.

The Akan are characterised in their social organisation by matrilineal descent, in which a person traces his or her descent through the mother's lineage. There are eight matrilineal clans – Aduana, Agona, Asakyiri, Asenee, Asona, Bretuo, Ekoona and Oyoko. The Fante groups have seven – Aboradze, Adwenadze, Anona, Konna, Nsona, Ntwea and Twidan. The Akan divide themselves into a number of subgroups all of which speak mutually intelligible languages. Among the Akan are such subgroups as Agona, Ahanta, Akuapem, Akwamu, Akyem, Aowin, Asante, Assin, Bono, Buem, Denkyira, Fante, Kwawu, Nzema, Sehwi, Twifo and Wassa.

Akan political structure is characterised by the rule of kings and chiefs as well as queen mothers, and the rulers derive their authority from the fact that they represent their people before their ancestors and occupy the stools of their ancestors. The Akan language puts a high premium on proverbs which have come out of the experiences and reflections of their ancestors, and the quality of a person's speech is judged by the use of proverbs which, the Akan say, 'put salt into speech'. 'A wise person,' say the Akan, 'is spoken to in proverbs, not in plain language', and in the case of a fool, they

say, 'when a fool is told a proverb the meaning of it has to be explained to him'. In their proverbs, one can see the wisdom and soul of the people. These proverbs are not spoken by word of mouth alone; they may be put into the language of the talking drums, carved on linguist staffs, stools and umbrella tops or printed in *adinkra* cloths. Proverbs were also cast in metal in gold weights which were used to weigh gold dust when it was used as currency in pre-colonial times.

Akan worldview

The Akan worldview expresses belief in the existence of two worlds – the visible and invisible worlds. Human beings, plants and animals inhabit the visible world, but the invisible or spirit world is the abode of God, commonly called *Onyame*, the ancestors, *Nananom Nsamanfo*, and the divinities, *abosom*. Besides these, there are other spirits, some of which are malignant, such as witches and other evil spirits. But in spite of this division, the Akan experience the two worlds as being in constant interaction with each other, creating a harmonious equilibrium. The reality that the two worlds interpenetrate each other is taken as axiomatic among the Akan and hence the regular and constant communication between humans and the spirit world. The roles of priests and priestesses, medicine men and women, rainmakers, diviners as well as the periodic rituals kings and chiefs perform for the ancestors, all confirm this.

The relationship between God and the spirits in the spirit world can be characterised as that between a superior being and subordinate beings. The spirits are all believed to have been created by God and there is no notion of equality in terms of power or being. The subordinate spirits have limitations placed on them whereas God has no limitations. The absence of shrines, temples, priests or priestesses who have a private extension to God and can mediate between God and others, as well as the absence of any visual representations, expresses the limitlessness of God. God is essentially a spirit, the Great Spirit.

The Akan have many names for God, but the commonest is *Onyame*, which means the Supreme Being, the Creator of all things, the Deity. This name has also been translated as the Shining One. *Onyankopon* means

Onyame who alone is great and refers to the ineffable majesty and exalted dignity of God. The name which the Akan use for the creative aspect of Deity is *Odomankoma Obooadee*. Other names reflect the attributes of God: *Amowia*, giver of sun and light, and since living things depend on the sun for life, the name suggests that to the Akan, God is the author or giver of life. The name *Totrobonsu* means the one who causes rain to fall abundantly, while the name *Nyaamanekose* means the one to whom you confide the troubles which come upon you.

Proverbs about God

Akan proverbs reflect many aspects of their belief about God.

- Creator

The Akan believe that God is the Creator and the following proverbs express this belief:

Osansa se: ade a Onyame aye nyinaa ye ('The hawk says that all that the Creator created is good'). In this proverb the Akan express their belief in the goodness of creation.

Asase trew, na Onyame ne panyin ('The earth is wide but God is the elder (Creator)'). Although the earth is immensely wide, God is the elder, in the sense that God is its creator. The expansiveness of the earth notwithstanding, there is an even greater expansiveness in the power which created it.

Onyame amma asomfena bribia, omaa no ahodannan ('If God did not give the swallow any gift, God gave her the gift of swiftness of movement'). This proverb recognises that God is the Creator and giver of talent, and that no creature was left without talent. The incredible dexterity of the swallow darting through the skies with amazing speed is recognised as a talent the Creator gave her.

- Creation on the Talking Drums

There is an important drum text among the Akan which says that the Creator created the *Esen*, the court crier; then the *Okyerema*, the drum-

mer; and lastly, *Kwawu Kwabrafo*, death. It is the duty of the *Esen* to keep order at the chief's court, and he represents order. The *Okyerema* symbolises knowledge, for he knows the history and lore of his society and can recite them on his drums. *Kwawu Kwabrqafo* is the executioner or death. To the Akan therefore, the Creator first created order, followed by knowledge, and finally death.

- Creator of Life and Death

Odomankoma boo nkwa, boo owu ('The Creator created life and death'). The Akan belief is that God is the author of both life and death and God can take life at God's own will. A euphemistic expression in Akan about someone's death is *waye Onyame de*, 'the dead person has become God's property'.

Onyame ankum wo a, wunwu ('If God does not kill you, you do not die'). God is the author of life and death and it is only when God decides to take you away that you die.

Nkwa tenten nti na Odomankoma boo oyare no, oboo aduru nso kaa ho ('It is because the Creator wished long life for us that when the Creator created disease, he/she also created medicine (to cure disease)'). The proverb suggests that God wished humans to live long and hence the creation of medicine which assists in fighting diseases which threaten life. In the act of creation, the Akan experience the love, care and protection the Creator has for humans.

- God as author of human destiny

Onyame nkrabea mu nni kwatibea ('The destiny God has assigned to you cannot be changed'). This proverb expresses the Akan belief that God gives each person a mission or destiny or appointed lot in the world and that the unfolding of this mission is seen in a person's life. But this destiny, once given by God, cannot be altered by humans. The proverb acknowledges the power of God over human destiny.

Nkrabea nyinaa nse ('All destinies are not the same'). God gives different

destinies to different people and therefore human destinies vary.

- God and justice

Onyame nnae ('God is not asleep, God sees everything and brings it to book'). The Akan name, *Brekyirihunuade*, The One who sees all, even that which happens 'behind closed doors', reinforces the belief that nothing escapes God's detection.

Onyame mpe asemmone nti na okyee din mmiako mmiako ('To avoid fraud (and cheating), God gave each creature a name'). To avoid confusion so that each creature would be responsible for its own deeds, God gave each creature a name so that it could be identified.

Onyankopon fa ne bo a, ontow no ntem ('When God picks up God's stone, He/She does not throw it at once'). The proverb means that God is compassionate and long suffering and does not rush to inflict punishment, but God's judgement will surely come.

- God and afflictions

Onyame ma wo yare a, oma wo ano aduru ('If God gives you sickness, God gives you its cure'). The proverb expresses God's care and providence, for God enables us to overcome our difficulties, including sickness. In instances where a person is handicapped, God enables that person to get along just like everybody else.

Onyame na owow obasin fufuu ma no ('It is God who pounds *fufuu* (a staple meal in Ghana), for the one-armed person'). In pounding *fufuu* in a mortar, a person normally uses both hands to hold the pestle, but in the case of the person with only one arm, God helps that person to pound his or her *fufuu* and to be able to eat his or her staple food just like everyone else. The proverb shows that God takes care of the handicapped or disadvantaged people because God is merciful and compassionate.

Aboa a onni dua, Onyame na opra ne ho ('It is God who drives away the flies for the tailless animal'). As other animals with tails use them to whisk off the flies and bugs which trouble them, the animal without a tail is

protected from being troubled by God. God, therefore, is the help of the afflicted.

- God's providence

Onyankopon ma wo nsa kora ma, na oteasefo ka gu a, osan hyia wo so bio ('If God gives you a cup of wine and an evil-minded person kicks it over, God fills it up for you again'). This proverb expresses the unfailing providence of God.

- God's omnipresence

Wudwane Onyame a, wohye n'ase ('If you flee from God, you are still under God'). God is everywhere and no person can escape from God's presence.

Wope asem aka akyere Nyame a, ka kyere mframa ('If you want to speak to God, speak to the winds'). Like the winds, God is everywhere and is invisible.

- God's power and wisdom

Onyame bo pow a, odasani ntumi nnan ('When God ties a knot, no living person can untie it'). God has immense power and inscrutable wisdom, and living people have neither the power nor the wisdom to undo what God has done.

Onyame ne hene ('God is King'). This is an allusion to God as Ruler of the whole world beyond whom there is no other power.

Nsem nyinaa ne Nyame ('All wisdom is from God'). The proverb expresses the Akan belief that God is the source of all wisdom.

- God and morality

Onyame mpe bone ('God does not like evil'). In the religious tradition of the Akan, evil is believed to be contrary to God's will and God punishes evil.

Onyankopon danseni ne ahonim ('God's witness is conscience'). The Akan believe that each person has a conscience and that God put it into humans to let us know when we do something wrong. The feeling we have in realising that we have done something wrong is believed to come from God. There is the proverb: *Wunyin a na wunhu, na woye bone de a wuhu* ('You do not see yourself growing up, but you (definitely) know it when you do wrong'). A person's conscience, *ahonim*, which is closely related to the part of the Creator in him or her, in the Akan concept of human beings convicts him or her of wrongdoing. The person whose conscience is clear enjoys peace but the one whose conscience is guilty is disturbed even though the crime remains undetected. The Akan believe that people whose consciences are disturbed fall ill, become mentally deranged or even suffer untimely deaths. Innumerable cases also abound of persons who make unsolicited confessions at shrines or to their fellow men and women because their conscience is disturbed.

The above proverbs express many aspects of Akan belief about God. God is the Creator and associated with the act of creation is the belief in God as the Upholder or Sustainer of what has been created. The absence of a belief in an end to the world in the worldview of the Akan assumes that the Creator sustains what has been created and that the universe was created to be supported by the Creator.

The goodness of creation is a fundamental belief, and no creature is without a special gift. The Creator is the author of life and death, as well as human destiny.

As a God of justice, God never sleeps and brings everything to book, and yet God is long-suffering. God takes care of people in affliction, pounding *fufuu* for the one-armed person and driving away the flies for the tailless animal.

God is omnipresent and transcendent. God is the source of wisdom and nothing is hidden from God's sight. God is also the guarantor of morality and in humans has left *conscience*, which is God's witness.

The divinities

The divinities (*obosom* – sing, *abosom* – pl) are regarded as subordinate beings. The Akan say: *Abosom ye Onyame mma* ('The divinities are the children of God'). As children, they do not have an independent existence, neither do they have as much power as God. The power that they have is derived from a higher source. The divinities are also regarded as messengers of God.

The divinities have a generic name, but each divinity also has its own specific name. A clear distinction is made between God and the divinities in the Akan language. God's name and attributes are unique.

The divinities may be male or female and each has an area of competence beyond which he/she cannot go. In each locality, the divinities are in the pantheon, whereas God is outside the pantheon as its Creator.

The divinities have specific places of abode in the environment, such as hills, rivers, lakes, rocks, and the sea. But these places of abode are distinguishable from the divinities themselves, for they are essentially spirits which have unlimited mobility and can come and go from their places of abode. These divinities also have shrines and temples as well as priests and priestesses who understand their peculiar language and can mediate between them and their devotees. This is a measure of their limitation, for the priests and priestesses know the idiosyncracies of each divinity and can provide for the needs of the divinity by placating or cajoling it into yielding to human requests. The priests and priestesses function not only as servants of the divinities, but as practitioners of medicine and their efficacy is attributed to the power of the divinities they serve.

The divinities are credited with powers of punishment and reward and are regarded as God's agents in the divine ordering of the universe. They have more power than humans.

Proverbs about the divinities

Proverbs alone do not exhaust the content of the beliefs about God and the divinities in the Akan religious heritage, but they do add considerable knowledge to Akan beliefs about the spirit world.

Obosom a oye nnam na odi aboade ('The divinity that is sharp (clever at predicting events and finding solutions to problems), receives votive offerings'). The popularity of the divinities depends on their ability to deliver what is expected of them. If they fail humans they are discarded. A divinity who has failed may even be burned, but such an action does not represent a rejection of belief in the divinities. For a divinity who fails is simply replaced by a more powerful one or one who promises greater satisfaction. The Supreme Being and the ancestors are always held in high esteem and never ridiculed or spoken ill of.

Obosom a onnii guan da, ohu guan aniwa ase mpe a, ose eye srade ('The divinity which has never eaten the flesh of a sheep, if it sees dirt in the eyes of a sheep, it says it is fat'). The meaning of this proverb is that an unsophisticated or unenlightened person is pleased with simple or worthless things. Lack of sophistication is a human weakness and the divinities also share some of the human characteristics of enlightenment or unenlightenment.

Conclusion

This article indicates that the analysis of proverbs about God and the divinities opens new perspectives on our understanding of the Akan religious system. So, for example, we find that the divinities are powerful spiritual beings. They receive offerings and sacrifices from humans and when they are well taken care of, they respond to human needs and the principle of reciprocity characterises the relationship between humans and the divinities. This principle however, is, absent in the relationship between humans and the Supreme Being, thus indicating clearly a clear distinction between God and the divinities/spirits. The divinities are also local beings, while God is omnipresent. More research in a similar vein in the many other living languages of Afrıca may therefore help us clarify many issues about African religious systems which had hitherto been controversial.

PART IV

Proverbs and women

Women as portrayed in some African proverbs

E Amoah

This article is an attempt to provide a critique of proverbs as important sources of cultural information on women in African societies. In the recent past the tendency has been to use information about African culture and traditions as bases for recommending 'a going back' to traditional forms of action, behaviour and thinking. One may remark that this effort, laudable as it is, has often been done without critical analysis of such traditional sources.

The intention is to depart from this tradition and attempt a critique of the traditional conceptions of women as portrayed in the proverbs. Even though many of the proverbs used relate to the Ghanaian scene, it could be contended that the general discussions are applicable to many other African societies. The article has three parts. The first is a discussion on proverbs as part of African cultural traditions. The second focuses on analytical discussions of women as portrayed in the proverbs. Finally, the third part deals with some conclusions and comments that arise from the general discussions as indicated above. A particular emphasis will be placed on proverbs as they relate to gender issues.

Proverbs as part of the tradition of African societies

There is enough documentation on the use of proverbs universally. One could refer to ancient classical sources, even biblical texts, and many ethnographic studies, where this is well documented. However, a point that is worth emphasising is that the images that are conveyed in the proverbs are culturally defined, and therefore proverbs may differ from culture to culture and sometimes even from period to period. With particular reference to Africa, the use of proverbs has been well documented in anthropological studies, unpublished theses, linguistic ethnography, judicial, moral, philosophical, political and religious studies[1] and studies on proverbs themselves. Thus proverbs may be said to throw light on several aspects of life in general and the range of references reinforces this point.

What are proverbs?

Proverbs are short, concise and pithy sayings couched in local imagery. Arising from this characteristic feature of proverbs is the fact that what they convey is easily stored and remembered. In the context of Ghanaian society, their correct usage is considered a mark of eloquence, maturity and wisdom. The following proverbs emphasise this point.

Oba nyansafo wobu no be, na wonnka n'asem
('The wise person is spoken to in proverbs and not in long discourse').

Kwasea na wobu no be a wokyere n'ase
('It is the foolish and the inexperienced person who requires explanations of proverbs').

What these two proverbs are conveying is that an experienced and mature person is expected to know and understand virtually everything about his or her society, especially as it is expressed in proverbial form.

Role and function of proverbs

It follows from this that proverbs relate to the day-to-day lives of the people including their aspirations, expectations, religion, morality, thinking, history, customs, in short, the total worldview of people. Proverbs act as store of information about the whole community. The use of proverbs therefore covers the whole gamut of life – from games and entertainment to very serious discussions, for instance, in moral education, in legal and political discussions.

Proverbs in the context of legal discussions

Perhaps one of the more serious ways in which proverbs are used relates to discussion in legal and political affairs in many traditional African courts. Rattray's work the *Law and Constitution of the Ashanti* is a very good source for illustrating this particular usage.

Researchers also found in research conducted in 1974 that local traditional courts cited proverbs to back their decisions in judicial proceedings.

For example, in a case of adultery where the judges found it difficult to access the relative weight of evidence from the parties concerned, the case was decided upon the basis of a proverb 'The evidence for adultery is taken from the woman's mouth' and this is the literal translation of the Akan, *Ayefere wogye no obaa an'omu*

In this assessment, therefore, the woman's words were taken as conclusive evidence for establishing the case of adultery. Similarly, in deciding an alleged case of rape, reference was made to a rather interesting proverb, *Se yareba wo na ne besia mu na edze wo banyin koyi a, nna enndzi no* ('If there is a disease in your mother's genital organ, and you remove it with your genital organ, without her consent, you have not raped her).

In other words the crucial factor in deciding rape cases is the intention and the motive behind the act. Proverbs as used in this way are therefore considered very important in traditional societies.

Proverbs in relation to morality

Another area in which proverbs were used significantly was in relation to moral norms and values formulated in the form of permitted acts and prohibitions. For example, the following proverbs clearly define for the people those actions that are discouraged and those that are permitted:

Obi mmfa ne nsa benkum nnkyere ne na kurom kwan
'No one uses his or her left hand to point to the mother's town.'

Egya gyae ma me nka, wokyi
'Father leave it for me to say, it is prohibited.'

Itsir kor mmpam
'One head does not form a council.'

Hatsew fa wommbua,
'No one makes a ridge across a half-thatched roof.'

Nsa ko na nsa ba
'A hand goes and a hand comes'

(Dependence, mutuality and reciprocity are an important aspect of human behaviour)

In any relevant case where the actual behaviour of people departs from these definitions, such proverbs are used either to bring them into line with expected behaviour, or to keep them away from the prohibited action. It is clear that proverbs still play an important role in the moral education of the people. In the course of the process of socialisation of individuals in African societies, these proverbs feature prominently. They are used either by guardians, parents or elders to reinforce the approved moral standard on the basis of which the behaviour of the individual is judged. People are also reprimanded on the basis of the standard conduct and behaviour that are conveyed in the proverbs. Indeed, even in story-telling and in informal conversations between adults and children, proverbs are often used to clinch the important points that have emerged in those conversations. Examples of such proverbs are the following

Se abofra hu ne nsa ho hohor a, onye panyin dzidzi
'If the child is able to wash his or her hands well, he or she eats with the elder.'

Abofra bo nnwa na ommo akyekyeree
'The child cracks the shell of a snail but not the shell of a tortoise.'

It is clear from all these examples and from the various contexts of their usage that proverbs are an important source of information on the conceptions and images of various people in society.

Women in proverbs

Women as mothers

One of the most interesting areas in which the above statement is amply illustrated relates to the images and conceptions of women, namely, their differential rights, obligations and responsibilities that are conveyed in these proverbs. There are indeed several proverbs that throw light on the conceptions of the functions of the role of women. Basically, they are conceived as lifegivers and in this respect the motherhood role is emphasised.

Associated with this are the required qualities and virtues that are considered appropriate to motherhood status. Examples of such proverbs are,

Obaatan na onim nea ne mma bedi

'It is the mother who knows what her children will eat.'

Ena yie

'Motherhood is supreme.'

Some proverbs bring out the importance of women in contributing to the continuity of the vast kinship systems which are an important feature of African societies. The following proverb emphasises this point:

Wo na wu a, na w'ebusua asa

'If your mother dies, your matrilineal kinship group comes to an end'

This is applicable regardless of the particular kinship form, that is, whether patrilineal or matrilineal. Predictably it is in the matrilineal kinship system that the continuity role of women is emphasised.

Women as wives

In almost all societies women's roles as wives are clearly recognised and due regard is given to them in their specific society. However, this is given a specific cultural expression appropriate to that particular society. In many African societies there are several proverbs that portray the crucial importance of women as wives, the expectations and duties that arise from this status and the premium that is placed on their positions. The following proverbs reinforce this point:

Oyere bone sene odan pan

'The bad wife is better than an empty house.'

Okwatrekwa nnkyen osigyani

'There is no naked man as the man without a wife'

Such proverbs encourage women to assume the position as wives. This is held up to them as desirable, indeed, as a natural role in which they would seem to be fulfilling themselves. Clearly the proverbs do not seem to encourage the status of the single woman, a phenomenon which is increasing in modern African societies.

As wives women are expected to show some ideal attributes known in the Akan as *Obaa pa*, the ideal or good women. This is featured in proverbs either directly or obliquely:

Obaa pa na oda keta pa so
'It is the good woman who sleeps on a good mat.'

Obaa pa na owe bedu guan
'It is the good woman who eats the sheep for the tenth child.'

This conception of *Obaa pa*, especially as applicable to women as wives, often implies an element of humility and obedience to husbands and to all people who are placed in similar positions of authority as their husbands. One cannot help remarking that this stress often borders on undue submissiveness even regarding their reproductive rights. Thus, for example, it is held that the ideal woman is the one who without protest bears ten children and therefore gains the sheep that is the customary 'prize'. This is in sharp contrast to the degree of freedom and autonomy of decision regarding the birth of children that underlies the ideal modern conceptions of family planning programmes which emphasise women's reproductive rights. This is one of the areas in which conflicts sometimes emerge between the traditional norms and practices and the modern ideas that are being increasingly introduced through world-funded projects of family planning in many African countries.

Women outside the home

In many societies African women also play several recognised roles outside the home. In societies with a single economy, women are often seriously involved in the agricultural sector, namely in cultivating land, planting and processing food crops, rearing animals and selling the products. Even though they are involved in all these, they are restricted to particular sectors and rights. Thus there are proverbs such as the following:

Obaa tone nyaadowa na onnton atuduro
'The woman sells garden eggs but not gun powder.'

Obaa nyen guan a bayin na odzi ano
'If the woman rears the sheep, it is the man who sells it.'

Obaa to itur a, otwere barima dan mu
'If a woman buys a gun, it is kept in a man's room.'
Obaa nndzi agor wo dua a ohaw wo ase, na odzi agor wo dua asomdwe wo ase
'A woman does not play under the tree where there are troubles but she plays under the tree where there is peace.'

These proverbs indicate clearly that traditional societies tend to define rather too strictly what women could or could not do. It looks as if there are differential rights, privileges and prestige assigned to women. In many cases they seem to be on the low side. The proverb, *Se obaa nyen guan a, bayin na odzi ano* ('If the woman rears a sheep it is the man who sells it'), is a very telling example of differential rights and privileges that relate to men and women.

Clearly also, the idea of division of labour is appreciated but the weight of responsibility seems to lie on the women, whereas the quantum of rights and privileges seem to be reserved for men. Even though the division of labour is recognised, women are also kept from involvement in certain sectors of social life, principally warfare. They are conceived of essentially as peacemakers and only on very rare occasions do women take up arms. An example of such women is Queen Mother Yaa Asantewa of Ejiso in Ashanti[2] in the latter part of the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth century. She is represented as a rare phenomenon never forgotten in the history of the Ashanti precisely because her actions departed from the traditional expectations of women.

Although women know so much about many sectors of life, they were often restricted by the social structure from expressing themselves fully and in the open. Indeed society itself recognised this and some proverbs convey this:
Akoko bere so nim adekyee na nnso ohwe onin ano
'The hen knows when it is dawn but it leaves it to the cock to announce it.'

In this proverb the role of women as communicators was clearly recognised but subtly suppressed. However, in some of the traditional courts in African societies reference is always made to consulting the 'old

women', that is the elderly, knowledgeable and intelligent women who know about the society, in many decision-making situations.

In my own research, especially on proverbs, I did not come across any significant number of proverbs relating to women's role in the political sphere. This does not necessarily mean that women did not participate in political affairs at all, though. There are many known instances of influential queen mothers, women linguists, councillors, advisers and heads of families.

Negative proverbs about women

So far the proverbs that have been used in illustration of their significant roles tended to convey mainly what the community thinks of women without an element of openly denigrating them. There are, however, certain proverbs that pointedly indicate negative conceptions about women. Examples of such proverbs are:

'The tongue is a very good thing if it is not the woman's.'
'Secrets should not know the house of a woman with a long tongue.'
'Women like where there is wealth and prosperity.'
'Like a woman, but never trust her.'
'If you have important news, don't tell your wife about it.'
'Women have long hair but scanty (short) brain.'
'Women are as fragile as eggs.'

In these proverbs, the negative images of women are obvious. They are portrayed as unintelligent, not trustworthy, gossipers and fragile. These negative views are expressed in attitudes and actions towards women in many African societies. It is not strange that in some of these societies wife battering is almost permissible as a mode of discipline.

It is no wonder also then that many women are kept from decision-making positions, taking into account such negative images that are expressed in the proverbs. Examples of such proverbs abound in many other African societies and they are taken as part of the general custom which reinforces patterns of conduct relating to wives and husbands, and women

and men. Conceptions such as these that underline these proverbs would seem to form the basis for violent actions against women.

There are yet more examples of proverbs that portray negative conceptions of women, and some of these are:

'A beautiful woman does not belong to one man.'

'It is only the lazy woman who plaits her hair in the afternoon.'

'Women should stop using lime in their bath, for the red ants which live on the lime tree stink.'

Such proverbs refer especially to the bodies of women and their sexuality. There seems to be a subtle control over their bodies and their sexuality. There are yet other proverbs that are pointedly negative but display a great deal of ambivalence in their attitude to women. Examples of such proverbs are:

'A woman is like a blanket, she keeps you warm when around you but makes you feel uncomfortable at the same time.'

'It is better to sleep with your bad wife than to sleep alone.'

'Fear women and live long.'

Among those attributes that are cherished are women's potential for life-giving, sustenance, nurturing peacemakers and comforting. Conversely they are seen as potentially destructive, dangerous, weak, incapable of reasoning, gossips, and generally untrustworthy.

To understand these contradictions one has to understand the full range of roles that they play in traditional African societies as well as the emotional, psychological and temperamental stresses that these roles do generate among the male counterparts with whom they are bound to interact. Similarly these also apply even in the interactions among women themselves. Thus it is not unknown in such situations to have instances of women characterising each other as aggressive, destructive, uncooperative, etc. Stemming from this is also the fact that women encourage these stereotypes in their daily interactions even with other women. In this way some of the images that are conveyed in the proverbs are clearly promoted by women. An added dimension of this feature is that through the process of socialisation most of these, especially negative and ambivalent conceptions, are internalised and passed on from generation to generation. What

is interesting then is that in such contexts and situations women themselves are known to use such proverbs whenever it suits them, unaware that they are perpetuating the images conveyed in the proverbs.

Proverbs and some gender issues

My argument all through has been that proverbs have been a very important part of African culture. They are a medium through which the important cultural images and perceptions of women are conveyed. We have also noted the importance of socialisation through the use of proverbs as an important process for perpetuating this kind of situation. Being an important part of the culture it is only to be expected that people still hold firmly onto some of these ideas and conceptions and this one might describe as cultural loyalty.

This presents a very difficult problem for women who want to question in many different ways some of these images of women as portrayed in the proverbs. Even in contemporary times one encounters some of these conceptions of women, especially their rights, their positions and power. This is because the ideologies of gender roles and power receive their backing from the various cultural traditions of which proverbs are a very important part as has been indicated. While we appreciate the strong cultural support for our identities, there is a need to critically re-examine it in an attempt to build a future which does not see men and women as living in different worlds. The ultimate goal is to create a situation where men and women can stand side by side and confront the system of beliefs, practices and norms which they have inherited and which sometimes seems to set one against the other. Proverbs then are useful tools or bases for gender analysis.

Notes

1 See Christaller J G, 1879; *Tshi proverbs*. Basel, Rattery 1916; *Ashanti proverbs*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, Amoah E 1974; Moral and religious significance of Wassaw proverbs (unpublished MA thesis) Amoah E 1979; Destiny and moral responsibility among the Wassaw, as portrayed in some Akan Proverbs (unpub-

lished PhD thesis); Rattary Ashanti Law and Constitution; Dzobo; African proverbs guide to conduct – the moral values of Ewe proverbs; Ackah CK 1988; Akan Ethics, Ghana Universities Press; Yankah K 1989; Proverbs: problems and strategies in field work. *Proverbium* 6.

2 Yaa Asensewa was the woman who led the Ashantis against the British when the Ashanti king was deported to the Seychelles.

Proverbs: issues of Yoruba femininity from a feminist hermeneutical perspective

Bolaji Olukemi Olayinka

Introduction

Yoruba society is 'infected' with the idea that man is superior to woman, ordained by God and nature to dominate the world. A major source of this ideology that subordinates women is incorporated into Yoruba proverbs. Yoruba proverbs *(òwe)* are among the supreme collective intellectual achievements of Yoruba culture. They are quintessential to the collective wisdom of Yoruba people and are usually expressed in a language form of astonishing beauty, power and subtlety.

The problem of definition relating to proverbs is one that has been the focus of much scholarship (see for example Finnegan 1981; Mieder 1985; Ogunjinmi & Na'Allah 1991, and Yusuf 1994). A cross-cultural definition of proverbs cannot be precise as it means many things to different people and cultures. It is therefore pertinent for us to seek for the true meaning of the term in the language and context of the culture in question. Among the Yoruba of south western Nigeria, the term *òwe* sheds light on its source of origin, namely, from institutions such as the oracle and professional guilds, hunters *(Ijálá)*, and gifted individuals that also include women. It is noteworthy that *òwe* are found in songs, and poems as well as various literary genres. A link with songs is aptly expressed in the following:

Ljà l'ó dé l'orin d'òwe
(Oduyoye 1971:96)
'It is a quarrel that turned spontaneous
singing into calculated dark sayings.'

Wolfgang Mieder's (1985:112) definition of the proverb is especially significant to this study of Yoruba proverbs on femininity from a feminist hermeneutical perspective. He defines the proverb as:

> ... a condensed form of age old folk sayings and biblical teachings. The proverbs attempt to teach us via the trial of others who are less fortu

nate than us ... unfortunately, far too many of them are anti-women in their conclusions.

Similarly, Amba Oduyoye (1983:253), who has studied Akan proverbs from a feminist angle, has shown that

... women have fallen victim to linguistic imagery which socializes them into accepting their place in the society.

In view of this, the influence of proverbs on the feminine cause is the focus of this article. It aims to bring to light aspects of the suppression of women by men as expressed in Yoruba proverbs. It examines this issue from a feminist hermeneutical perspective. This is basically an approach that examines the oppressive structure of patriarchal societies. It is an in-depth study of the experiences of women in androcentric cultures. 'Feminist' and 'feminism' are political labels indicating support for the aims of the women's movement (Toril Moi 1989:182). Feminity, however, is interpreted as a set of cultural expectations. Mercy Oduyoye (1992:193) defines feminism as:

... not the word of the female, but the word of all who are conscious of the true nature of a human community as a mixture of those things, values, roles temperaments, etc, that we dichotomize into feminine and masculine.

Writing about feminism especially as it relates to Africa, Olubunmi Smith (1989:17) laments that:

...the word feminism, even when it means liberation of the human community from the shackles of traditional values, is threatening to the African men who ignore the fact that they are themselves trapped in the same tribal systems of social controls which they safeguard in the name of tradition.

In the light of this, this article probes into the particular nature of the attitude and behaviour of Yorubas toward women in a selection of 19 Yoruba proverbs about women. Our inquiry is directed along the lines of particular situations and contexts of daily existence that are peculiar to the Yoruba society.

Research has shown (Yusuf 1994, among others) that Yoruba proverbs on issues relating to women are predominantly negative. That is, they degrade or suppress the aspirations of women in one form or another. Accordingly, only negative proverbs are selected for this study. For the purpose of analysis, our selection of Yoruba proverbs dealing with the suppression of women are divided into four groups: marriage, sexuality, psychology and spirituality. The collection used ranges from published (see for example Ajibola 1947; Ojoade 1983; Oyesakin 1985; Oladeji 1988; Yusuf 1994 and 1995) and unpublished sources to oral interviews conducted randomly by this researcher.

Analysis

A correct interpretation of the Yoruba text is crucial to our analysis. Accordingly, wherever an obvious Western interpretation of the translation would be misleading it is explained further. This is because the full impact of proverbs on Yoruba women can only be grasped when there is a true understanding of the proverbs as they relate to the Yorubas. This approach allows for empathy with the nature of the oppression endured by Yoruba women on account of proverbs.

Marriage

The institution of marriage is central to Yoruba society. It is a complex affair and the meeting point of all the members of a given community (Mbiti 1969:133). Although the roles of wife and mother are highly exalted by the Yoruba, they have little regard for womanhood. Marriage among the Yorubas is predominantly polygynous. Women are seen and regarded as appendages of men. A woman's role as a wife not only includes child bearing but she must also ascertain the production of a male offspring. Failure to achieve this means her inability to ensure the husband's immortality. Yoruba women not only have to live up to high levels of expectations of loyalty and faithfulness to and respect for their husbands but they must also accommodate their husband's taunts and even outright accusations of infidelity. This contrasts with the standard of conjugal faithfulness and fidelity expected of husbands, which is minimal (Oladeji 1988:50).

The following proverbs address the issues in question:

1 *Eni t'ó fé arewà fé ìyonu, eni gbogbo ni í bá won tan* (Ajibola 1947:18)
'Whoever marries a beautiful woman is married to trouble; she claims to be related to everybody.'

2 *Omo t'o dára ti baba rè ni*
Omo burúkú ti ìyá rè ni (Misc)
'The good child is the fathers's
The bad child belongs to the mother.'

3 *Owú tí ìyá bá gbòn l'omo yió ran* (Yusuf 1995:41)
'It is the cotton that the mother picks that the child spins.'
(Children take after their mothers)

4 *Oko l'o lórí aya* (Misch)
'The husband is the head of the wife.'

5 *Obìnrin pé l'óde ó fi ìgbójú wo 'lé, èsè rè di méjì, ìyà rè di púpò* (Oladeji 1988:51)
'An "unfaithful" wife returns home late but with bravado and effrontery; her sins are double, her punishment increases.'

6 *obè tí baálé kìí je,*
Iyálé kìí sèé (Ajibola 1947:29)
'The stew that the head of the house forbids must never be cooked by the wife.'

The user of proverb 1 claims that women are inherently promiscuous and adulterous. It is evident that this proverb emanates from a circle that is excessively androcentric. It suggests that even if a woman was caught in the act of adultery she would claim that the man was her relative. This is because in an extended family set-up it is difficult for her husband and neighbours to know and therefore identify all her relatives.

Proverbs 2 and 3 depict one of the selfish attitudes that characterise patriarchal societies. In Yorubaland women have no legal claim to the children in the family. The good child is seen as belonging to the father. Ironically, the deviant child is seen as belonging only to the mother.

Proverbs 4 to 6 are similar in that they lay emphasis on the lordship of the man. Proverb 5, however, transports us to the additional realm of wife battering – and under a flimsy excuse at that! The issue of domestic violence is of great concern to the feminist movement.

Sexuality

Feminist opposition has centred largely on beliefs and sayings that reinforce traditional stereotypes (Lewis 1974:85). Among the Yorubas, a woman's sexuality belongs exclusively to the precincts of her husband. This also holds for women in the biblical tradition, especially in the Judeo-Christian world (Olayinka 1992:133). Adultery with a married woman was regarded as a serious crime mainly because it violated the husband's exclusive rights over his wife's sexuality. Ironically, infidelity by the husband was not considered a crime unless a married or betrothed woman was involved (Kathleen Coyle 1990:213).

The sanctity of the sex organs to Africans in general is pointed out by Mbiti (1969:146) who asserts that:

> the sexual organs are the gates of life ...
> the genitals and buttocks are the parts of the body most carefully covered. Their lack of covering constitutes 'nakedness' in the eyes of traditional Africans.

The following are among the Yoruba proverbs that encapsulate beliefs that greatly denigrate a women's sexuality.

7 *Obìnrin kìí gba owó àlé tán kí ó so wípé kíní sa nsè oun* (Misc)
'A woman cannot collect money from her concubine (for sexual gratifi cation) and question why she is tired.'

8 *Okó ilé kìí jo obìnrin l'ójú àfi tí o bá dó ti ìta* (Ojoda 205)
'A woman does not appreciate the penis at home (her husband's) unless she has sex with one from outside.'

9 *Bí èníyan bá ká okó mó ìdí obìnrin yio so wípé kùkú ni* (Yusuf Unpublished)

'If a woman is caught with a penis in her vagina (that is In the act of adultery) she will still offer the excuse that it is a corn-cob.'

10 *Obò ní ìtìjú òun l'ó pò tó bè tí òun fi lo sá pamó sí ibi tí òun wà; sùgbón tí òun bá rí okó, òun láti s'ìlèkùn fún un* (Ojoade : 209)
'The vagina says she is so shy that she has to hide, but when she sees the penis, it is mandatory for her to open the door.'

11 *Obò kò j'oba*
Ilú k'ò dàrú
N'ífjó òbò bá j'oba
Nì ilú yió dàrù (Misc)
'(When) The vagina is not on the throne the town is peaceful,
It is on the day the vagina ascends the throne, that the town will be in turmoil.'

Proverbs 7–11 above portray the popular belief of the Yorubas that women are incurably promiscuous. They are couched in the language of obscenity as they make direct reference to the male and female genitalia. The female genital is specially abused. Proverb 7 suggests that a tired woman could be accused of adultery. The eighth proverb, however, proclaims the belief that when it appears that the woman is sexually demanding, the husband often suspects her of committing adultery to satisfy her insatiable lust. It is even implied in this proverb that a woman cannot but have a lover as she does not always value her husband's penis.

A woman's ability to find excuses even in obvious situations is depicted in the ninth proverb, while proverb 10 presents the woman as being fickle and therefore an easy prey for seduction. It makes an allusion to the timid nature of a woman but also labels her as one who craves sexual gratification under any circumstance.

Proverb 11 does not present the scenario of Helen of Troy or the Yoruba myth of *Móremí*. This proverb makes it emphatic that the town is at peace mainly because a 'vagina' is not on the throne but warns that a chaotic state will come in once the 'vagina' is enthroned.

It is clear that these proverbs are sexist in nature. In the case of adultery more often than not the woman is held as the only culprit. This is similar to

what obtains in the Judeo-Christian world (cf Jesus freeing the woman caught in adultery in the Gospel accounts). Yoruba society is predominantly patriarchal. Pamela Smith (198 :14) aptly comments that in traditional societies where male dominance is buttressed by an ideology of male superiority the woman is bound to suffer (1989:14).

Psychology

Proverbs are also used to affect the psychological make-up of women. In such cases stereotype images of female behaviour are projected. The following proverbs illustrate this point:

12 *E má f'inú han f'óbìnrin, ab'enu mímú bí abe* (Oyesakin 1985:360)
'Do not confide in women, whose mouths are as sharp as blades.'

13 *Ojú l'obìnrin mò* (Misc)
'Women are deceptive.'

14 *Obìnrin t'orí òrò r'odò* (Misc)
'A woman sets out for the river for the love of chattering (women are loquacious or gossips).'

15 *Obínrin b'ímo fún ni kò pé k'ó mà pa ni. Obìnrin kò b'ímo fún ni kò pé k'ó má pa ni Obìnrin a b'àlè méfà, àlè méfa, won kò mo ara won* (Yusuf unpublished)
'(The fact) that a woman bears children for a man does not prevent her from killing him; (The fact) that a woman does not bear children for a man does not stop her from killing him.
A woman would have six concubines, yet the six concubines do not know one another.'

The recurring theme in proverbs 12, 13 and 15 is untrustworthiness. These proverbs portray women as being of doubtful character, malevolent and undependable. The average Yoruba man believes that once a secret is divulged to a woman, she will eventually let it out. She may even use this knowledge to 'destroy' the man for her tongue is like a razor-sharp blade (cf proverb 12).

That a woman is deceptive and hypocritical is shown in proverb 13. It depicts the woman as having conflicting loyalties in her relationship with her husband. The woman's faithfulness is often doubted by her husband for he believes that once he is away she is capable of committing any atrocity. In other words, 'Out of sight, out of mind'.

Proverbs 14 labels the woman as talkative and a gossip. Proverb 15, on the other hand, lays emphasis on the woman being murderous. The fact that she had children for a man would not stop her from killing him. Her promiscuity is also stressed, as she is said to be capable of having six lovers without one knowing the other.

Spirituality

Omoyajowo (1990:75) notes that 'in the traditional Yoruba society with all its prejudices against women, religion, more than any other factor, plays a major role in ascribing status to women' (1990:75). Nevertheless, a woman's spirituality in Yorubaland could be said to be characterised by contradictions. This is partly because although there are female deities – for example *Yemoja*, the female deity of all rivers and mother of all *orisas*, *Osun*, the fertility goddess, *Olósà*, goddess of the lagoon); and *Oya*, (goddess of river Niger) (Hallgren 1988:26) – there are imposed restrictions on women's spiritual aspirations for different reasons.

16 *Gbogbo obìnrin l'àjé* (Misc)
'All women are witches.'

17 *Enìyàn tí kò gbón nìí b'obìnrin mulè*
Ijó obìnrin bá mo awo ló bàjé (Misc)
'It is only an unwise man that swears an oath with a woman.
It is the day a woman gets to know the secret of a cult that the cult is demystified.'

18 *Awo Egúngún l'obìnrin lè se*
Awo Gèlèdé l'obìnrin lè wò,
B'obìnrin bá f'ojú k'orò
Orò á gbe (Yusuf unpublished)
'It is the cult of *Egúngún* that a woman can participate in.

It is the cult of *Gèlèdé* that a woman can watch.
If a woman sees *Orò*, *Orò* will carry her away.

19 *Etí l'obìnrin fìí gbó ohún Orò* (Yusuf unpublished)
'It is with the ears that a woman hears the sound of *Orò*' (the spirit of purification).

Witchcraft is especially associated with women in Yorubaland, although men are often admitted into the cult. Witches exist to perpetuate both good and evil, depending on the situation. The use of witches in the proverbs, however, is to denigrate women. Women are believed to possess innate powers which could render any herbal preparation impotent, hence the reason for their restriction from many ritual performances.

Proverb 17 has a spiritual implication, namely that once a woman gets to know a secret of an esoteric nature all will be lost or demystified.

Proverb 18 introduces us to a new realm of male chauvinism that borders on the spiritual denigration of women. *Egúngún* and *Gèlèdé* are religious cults whose followers include men and women. They both celebrate re-enactment of life. *Egúngún* celebrates immortality while spiritual and fertile power are emphasised in *Gèlèdé* (Hallgren 1988:57). *Orò*, however, is sexistly seen to be exclusively in the domain of men. The cult is solely for communal purification. While women can participate (although with limitations) in the cults of *Egúngún* and *Gèlèdé*, they are forbidden to see *Orò* in all its ramifications. One is apt to question why the *Egúngún* regalia are worn mostly by men. Are there no female ancestors? For the aim is to show that the soul of an ancestor is now in the abode of the living. Yet mo mention is made of the souls of departed women. Purification more often than not is associated with the female. One wonders why in *Orò* purificatory rites women are not allowed to see *Orò*? All these attitudes, one may argue, border on the promotion of male supremacy at the expense of the female.

Conclusion

Our focus has been on those Yoruba proverbs that portray women negatively. These negative proverbs correlate with negative attitudes and

practices. It is evident from our study that proverbs are powerful indices, especially in contemporary society, and are significant to feminist aspirations. A great deal of disagreeable sexist messages are contained in Yoruba proverbs. The onus therefore lies on feminists to study the proverbs in order to erode their negative impact. It is pertinent for women to be able to formulate and design strategies to counter the social denigration of women.

Yoruba proverbs are significant for the coming twenty-first century as the once popular belief in the West that proverbs were out of fashion does not hold true for the Yorubas. This researcher's acquaintance with Yoruba proverbs in their context over the years (from childhood to the present) has led to the personal conviction that they are relevant and therefore are here to stay. This is especially because Yoruba proverbs are not confined to the ambit of the traditional society but are also largely employed in popular music, evangelism, politics and advertisement. The syncretic Yoruba popular music of *Jùjù* and *Fújì*, etc, various forms of Gospel preaching, political canvassing, and print/audio-visual advertising have developed unique ways of utilising proverbs and thereby ensuring the continued use of proverbs in the future.

It is hoped that educational institutions, though 'slow footed' in this realm, will soon catch up!

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PART V

Proverbs and Christianity

Faith is caught rather than taught: the significance of African proverbs for the inculturation of Christian faith

Willie van Heerden

Introduction

In Africa Christian theology is grappling with the issue of how to relate Christian perspectives of faith to other perspectives from which people find meaning and by means of which they express their deepest convictions. This issue involves the process of inculturation, which is 'the on-going dialogue between faith and culture or cultures' (Shorter 1988:11; cf Burden 1991:3). Several factors impeded the inculturation process of the Christian faith in Africa, one of these being the 'confessional straitjacket approaches' which directed (and sometimes still direct) the practice of Christian faith in Africa. Over a long period of time theology held that the historical impetus of the Christian faith simply speaks for itself, and for this reason it is not necessary to take any account of other positions.

Western confessional theology and the theology of salvation-history often found the wisdom literature of the Bible to be an embarrassment. Recently, however, Christian theologians have shown new interest in the biblical wisdom tradition. This has been a result of renewed interest in the dialogue between the Christian faith and other faith perspectives – one of these being the general wisdom within various cultures, also the way in which this wisdom is expressed in different proverbs. The use of such proverbs in particular can serve as a bridge between one perspective of faith and other perspectives by means of which people find meaning in life. It is particularly the *metaphorical nature* of a predominant number of proverbs which makes this possible.

This article addresses the following topics. In the first section, I will relate an incident which underscores the importance of the *inculturation process* for the meaningful assimilation of outside perspectives. In the second I will endeavour to argue that – since there is a cultural gap between biblical wisdom and current African wisdom – inculturation will be more than the explaining, or the re-enacting of biblical faith in terms of corresponding

African concepts or customs. Inculturation should also involve the keeping of the different traditions in a creative tension, or in a viable balance.

Third, I will focus on the metaphorical nature of proverbs, since the use of metaphorical proverbs can bring about the extension of one's existing perspectives as well as new forms of understanding, and is therefore concerned with order and change. These are important facets of the process of inculturation. Metaphorical proverbs paradoxically use the familiar to bring about changes of perspective.

Fourth, I will illustrate how, according to the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus used proverbs to 'inculturate' his radically new message to general folk wisdom and to jolt people into new insights.

Inculturation and a story about an egg

A fascinating incident is recounted at the end of Apsley Cherry-Garrard's book entitled *The worst journey in the world* (cf Midgley 1989:15–17). This incident reminds me of how the Christian gospel is often treated. The philosopher Mary Midgley tried to explain the difference between 'knowledge' and 'wisdom' by quoting this incident. Cherry-Garrard's book tells of the long, gruelling, winter journey undertaken during an Antarctic expedition by Cherry-Garrard and two friends. They risked their lives struggling through cold, dark and inhospitable terrain in a desperate effort to bring back the first specimens ever secured of the emperor penguin's eggs. The journey ruined the health of the three companions. Cherry-Garrard's two companions died. However, the journey resulted in his returning with three eggs, two of which were later found to be broken. On arriving in England, Cherry-Garrard alone remained to deliver the remaining egg to the Natural History Museum. However, when he arrived there, nobody seemed to know anything about the egg, or to be in the least interested in receiving it. Eventually he left it with some uninterested official, and went on his way.

Sometimes it may be that the Christian gospel is treated like this 'egg' – something to be handed down to recipients. Similarly, concentration on the hard facts of doctrine or scholarship could also reduce the gospel to mere 'knowledge'. But who will receive the egg? Knowledge divorced from

wisdom becomes boring background furniture in which nobody is much interested (Midgley 1989:15). Problems concerning (new) knowledge should be related to more fundamental problems of living. And that is what wisdom and proverbs are all about.

The story of Cherry-Garrard's egg reminds me of an Ashanti proverb: 'The responsibility of power [read: sharing your religion with others] is like holding an egg. Grasp it too tightly and it will drip through your fingers; hold it too loosely and it will drop and break.' If we are too possessive about certain dictums of the Christian tradition, clutching it too tightly, others will not be able to receive it (like the egg dripping through your fingers); nevertheless, if we hold it too lightly, implying that 'anything goes', it will also drop and break. Not really knowing what we have to offer is not much better than standing empty-handed. In intercultural communication we need the wisdom to avoid both traps: of holding on too possessively, or of being blasé about one's own heritage.

Proverbs, wisdom and culture gaps

'All wisdom is not taught in your school,' says a Hawaiian proverb. 'Wisdom' is not a homogeneous entity. Any discussion about wisdom, or certain expressions of wisdom, needs to be clear about the aspects of wisdom under consideration. Briefly, I wish to identify four typical expressions of wisdom (cf Winton 1990:28).

- *Speculation about the figure of Wisdom / Wisdom personified:* This is an important theme in the wisdom traditions of many cultures. Personified wisdom is also an important theme in Old Testament wisdom literature. Some scholars claim that the so-called Wisdom Christology should be seen against this background (cf Winton 1990:28).

- *Wisdom as a human attribute:* The designation of someone as 'wise' is a common phenomenon in most cultures, but the range of meanings for such an observation is quite diverse (cf Wilckens 1971:465–526), and may not even always be linked to the use of proverbial utterances by such a sage.

- *Wisdom as insight (mantic wisdom):* In this case, wisdom is associated with the interpretation of dreams, knowledge of the future, and special understanding. For example, in the Old Testament Daniel's wisdom is reflected in his understanding of mysteries (cf especially chapter 2); and in Daniel 2:27 the wise man is linked to the 'enchanter, magician, and diviner' when explaining the meaning of a mystery.

- *Proverbial (experiential) wisdom:* Wise utterances and instruction overlap in some respects with the preceding two categories. One feature of proverbial wisdom is to encapsulate different aspects of wise behaviour: to describe the way things are, or to give advice about the wisdom of certain decisions.

It is this latter form of wisdom with which I am most concerned in this article, although African cultures also reflect the other expressions of wisdom.

What is 'wisdom' all about? Generally, wisdom teachers are intent on gaining a sound, practical grasp of reality based on insight and understanding, and living accordingly (that is to make good judgements) (cf Spangenberg 1991:228). It is often pointed out that a sense of order underlies wisdom. Wisdom traditions, however, are not static. For example, the wisdom in Israel developed through the same phases as Egyptian and Mesopotamian wisdom, although the developments took place in a different era (cf Loader 1986:9). According to the early developmental stages of these wisdom traditions the wise were those who in everyday activities sought to be in harmony with the divine order which underlies reality. This was achieved by doing the right thing at the right time. There are numerous examples of this phase in Proverbs 10-29: A word has to be timely (15:23; 25:11); a loud greeting at an inappropriate time will be taken as a curse (27:14); and appropriate actions are prescribed for specific circumstances (10:5; 14:35; 16:11; 23:1–3).

In the following phase there is a process of fossilisation. As well as examples from the Book of Proverbs, there is the instance of the three friends of Job who were exponents of a systematic or dogmatic kind of wisdom. Rigid wisdom comes as a result of enscripturating wisdom utterances. In this process the actual relation to reality is weakened and wisdom petrifies into an abstract, rigid system. When scripturally encoded,

wisdom can no longer be related to the realities of the original situation and time. Reality has then been compressed in dogma or doctrine (cf Loader 1986:9).

At this stage a crisis ensues. So, for example, the Preacher of the Book of Ecclesiastes reacted to this rigidity by propagating the idea of relativity. One element is repeatedly placed in opposition to another, and the frustration resulting from the tension is accentuated. Loader (1979), in his book *Polar structures in the Book of Qohelet*, emphasises the role played by polarisation in Ecclesiastes. The Preacher ultimately refuses to resolve this tension. He remains engaged in his own traditions and yet is detached from them. He vehemently criticises the mainstream wisdom of his day, and yet employs and appropriates for himself all the typical forms of expression that characterise that wisdom tradition.

When modern African people grapple with the Christian faith, the relatedness of biblical wisdom to reality is weakened by another factor, cultural differences. People of different cultures, in differing degrees, live and share in different realities and worlds. Appropriate behaviour in one cultural context might be inappropriate in another. Qoheleth's approach provides a 'solution' to this problem: keep the different traditions in tension, or in balance, with one another. This is a paradoxical outlook on life. A modern psychiatrist, Dr M Scott Peck, recommends a remarkably similar approach to life: 'Wisdom is filled with paradox. In part wisdom is the understanding of paradox. But, as if it were not enough, the acquisition of wisdom is itself paradoxical' (Peck 1985:117). Peck compares the acquiring of wisdom to a dance; wisdom is born from a dance which usually requires two partners (cf Peck 1985:118).

In similar vein the New Testament scholar Klyne Snodgrass (1990:190–191) reminds us of the tensions and paradoxes inherent in the Bible and people's lives:

> To live biblically is to live wisely in the midst of tension ... Tension allows us to live as whole persons and to do justice to all the gospel ... The truth is not in the middle, and not in one extreme, but in both extremes. The grace of God, which provides the coherence to our lives, is the power by which we live out our tensions. We live between truths.

We may conclude from this section on wisdom that one element of inculturation will probably be the upholding of a creative tension between biblical perspectives and modern (African) ways of dealing with life's most important questions. In the following section I hope to point out that metaphor is perhaps the best tool for dealing with creative tensions or paradoxes. Since most proverbs are characterised by metaphor, they should be taken seriously in the process of inculturation.

Proverbs used metaphorically

'A proverb is a chameleon. It looks in two directions.'

Wolfgang Mieder (1993:9) observes that certain scholars want to regard only metaphorical proverbs as true proverbs. Metaphorical proverbs, however, should be distinguished from literal proverbs. It is a truism that metaphor constitutes an important characteristic of many proverbs. It is indeed the metaphor of the proverb that enables one to employ proverbs in so many different contexts. Hugh Petrie (1979:438), an educationist, challenges the view that the cognitive significance of metaphor is extremely limited. There are two grounds for his challenge of this view. These are directly related to the topic of this article. He argues that metaphor enables one to transfer learning and understanding from what is well known to what is less well known in a vivid and memorable way. He also claims that the very possibility of learning something radically new can only be understood by presupposing the working of something very much like metaphor (Petrie 1979:438). These two possibilities are of great importance for the inculturation of the Christian faith: the possibility of transferring understanding from what is well known (for example African proverbs) to what is less well known (biblical faith perspectives), as well as creating the possibility of radical restructuring of one's religious frameworks.

An issue in the plethora of literature on metaphor which is of particular interest is the differences between literal language, comparative metaphor, and interactive metaphor. The comprehension of literal language only requires assimilation into existing frameworks of understanding. Literal proverbs like the following serve as examples:

'Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge, but he who hates correction is stupid' (Proverbs 12:1).
'He who calls the chief's regent "little bow legs" calls for the time he will emigrate' (Haya proverb).
'A talkative person does not know he is abusing the chief (Haya proverb).

Language used metaphorically, however, implicitly links two apparently dissimilar realities, suggesting that these realities have something in common. The use of comparative metaphor allows for the extension of existing knowledge, but does not in itself provide a new form of understanding. It merely requires simple extensions of the framework in the light of a more comprehensive framework. The following metaphorical proverbs are of this kind:

'Grey hair is a crown of splendour; it is attained by a righteous life' (Proverbs 16:31).
'A child is an axe, when it cuts you, you still pick it up and put it on your shoulder' (Bemba proverb).

There are difficulties, however, when attempting to construe all metaphors as implicit comparisons. Consider the following example (Petrie 1979:442): 'Virginity is the enamel of the soul.' Is the comparison to be drawn between the positive features of clarity, strength, and protectiveness, or the negative features of rigidity, brittleness, and enclosure? Nothing in the metaphor tells us. It is only the contextual knowledge of speaker or hearer which will determine the appropriate understanding of this saying.

For reasons such as these some people have claimed that there is also an interactive level of metaphor. It would be illuminating in some of these instances to say that the metaphor creates similarity rather than argue that it describes some similarity which existed previously (Black 1962:37). If it creates similarities, then it provides the bridge between a person's earlier conceptual and representational frameworks and the later, unfamiliar framework. Such radically new knowledge is possible because it accommodates anomaly or paradox, which requires changes in the framework of understanding.

Rev Joseph Healey (1995:1), who lives in Tanzania, presented a paper in Maputo earlier this year entitled '"To be called is to be sent": toward an African narrative missiology based on proverbs, sayings and stories'. 'To be called is to be sent' is a Swahili proverb which is a very fine example of interactive metaphor. The following proverbs serve as further examples of interactive metaphor:

'To give is to store' (Chitonga proverb).

'To be called is to be sent' (Swahili proverb).

'Even in laughter the heart aches, and joy ends in grief' (Proverbs 14:13).

'A father who spares the rod, hates his son, but one who loves him keeps him in order' (Proverbs 13:24).

'A prince may be persuaded by patience, and a soft tongue breaks down solid bone' (Proverbs 25:15).

Thus, the functions proposed for metaphor, and therefore for a metaphorical proverb, are that it makes learning more memorable; it helps one to move from the more familiar to the less familiar; and it provides a mechanism for changing our modes of representing reality, in thought and language.

Thomas Green (1979:463), another educationist, reacted to Petrie's explanation of interactive metaphor in a way that underscores the relevance of Petrie's work for this paper:

> It seems to me that the paradigm case for learning something radically new in Petrie's sense would occur in the case of *religious teaching* [my emphasis]. I do not see how one can come to possess religious knowl edge as more than an agreeable possibility except through the use of metaphor.

Petrie (1979:450–452) divides the process of acquiring *radically new knowledge* (undergoing changes in one's cognitive or religious frameworks) into four different components. The first component he calls the *anomaly step*, or *paradox step*. This consists of a person's perception of a situation as problematic enough to call for changes in one's cognitive or religious frameworks. A person needs not be aware of this.

The second step is providing a metaphor. An interactive metaphor provides an alternative cognitive structure, without containing the final 'solution' or 'diagnosis'. An interactive process is set in motion in the mind of the person who perceived the anomaly or paradox. This process reminds me of two sayings about proverbs (cf Spicker 1994:178,179): 'Proverbs are unhatched eggs; one should sit on them – not only enjoy them'; and 'Proverbs are stepping stones in a river, not a bridge. One has to jump.'

The third step is actually acting in the world and observing the results. An interactive metaphor is not going to succeed unless activity takes place. The activity is guided by the metaphor. The point of the metaphorically suggested activity is to see if it will remove the anomaly, or if it will make sense to live by the paradox.

The fourth step is the logical outcome of the preceding step. One acts according to the modified cognitive structure or religious framework.

If one combines the last two steps, this process bears a striking resemblance to the phenomenon of 'rites of passage'. Victor Turner (1969:94), with reference to the pioneering work of Arnold van Gennepp, has shown that all rites of passage or 'transitions' are marked by three phases: separation, liminality (crossing the threshold) and reincorporation. It is of interest that some scholars have observed that liminality often provides a social setting for wisdom instructions (Perdue 1981:114–127). The three phases of liminality correspond with Petrie's components of the process of undergoing radical changes in one's cognitive or religious frameworks:

separation: anomaly, paradox
liminality : providing a metaphor
reincorporation: acting in the world.

According to this scheme, metaphorical proverbs would play a role in the second step in particular. It is noteworthy that many features of proverbs correspond to Turner's description of liminality (cf Turner 1969:95). A few examples may suffice:

- The attributes of liminality, or liminal *personae* ('threshold people') are *ambiguous*, since this condition and these persons elude the network

of classifications that normally locates states and positions in cultural space. The ambiguity of proverbs and the difficulty of defining them in terms of linguistic criteria is a well established fact (cf Mieder:1993:18).

- The *hermeneutical openness* of proverbs is matched by Turner's observation that strong feelings of comradeship or alienation may result from the state of liminality (cf Turner 1969:96). Comradeship strengthens 'order'. Radical, or even moderate, alienation tends to lead to social change.
- The *authority* behind proverbs often silences the voices of people in conflict situations. In a liminal situation the neophyte usually becomes passive and humble in the presence of authority figures who seem to have absolute control over them.

In this paragraph I narrow the focus to some of the functions of metaphorical proverbs, which prove that proverbs might be useful tools for achieving two objectives:

- To have growing respect for, and a better understanding of, new perspectives – even those which originated in cultures different from one's own – as a result of an extension of one's knowledge.
- To be able to undergo – or bring about – radical changes in one's own, or other people's conceptual and religious frameworks.

Jesus's use of proverbs as an example for inculturation

In the era at the beginning of the Christian faith, wisdom presented itself in two rather different forms, namely as practical wisdom and speculative wisdom. Speculative wisdom corresponds with what I called the 'second phase' of wisdom development. In this phase wisdom's relatedness to its incumbent reality becomes weakened and it petrifies into an abstract, rigid system. Furthermore, speculative wisdom, the Ancient Near Eastern precursor of Hellenistic philosophical speculation, actively played an essential role in the inception of Christian theology, particularly in providing christological categories.

The Synoptic Gospels, unlike Christian theology of later centuries, drew far more heavily on practical wisdom than on the speculative tradition.

Practical wisdom, the older and less theoretical side of wisdom, is characteristically shown in the Synoptics by the presence of two forms of wisdom: the proverb and the parable. Beardslee (1981:164) points out that it is worth noting how much of the older practical wisdom setting remains in the Synoptic Gospels. Although proverbial wisdom is often cautious and middle-of-the-road, it does – on account of its metaphorical nature – have an existential dimension. Proverbial wisdom, therefore, has a universal and individual appeal. This appeal cannot meaningfully take place without some kind of common contingency which enables it to address one. The Synoptics provide several examples of proverbs which express a rather general folk-wisdom, with its relaxed and sometimes even resigned attitude towards the making of choices. A typical proverb of this kind is. 'Seek and you will find' (Matthew 7:7). Beardslee (1981:169) calls it 'a typical proverb of continuity'. By this 'continuity' he refers to that proverbial wisdom which strengthens existing perspectives on life and often stems from everyday experience. There is a saying which refers to this characteristic of proverbs: 'Every proverb is the Amen after an experience.' This particular use and appreciation of 'proverb of continuity' was part of Jesus's proclamation. However, it served a different purpose from merely disclosing the characteristic features of his message. The use of these 'proverbs of continuity' would in this way have established the authority of Jesus's message.

Metaphorical proverbs are significant for another reason: they indicate what one may call the 'field of intensification' (Beardslee 1981:170). These proverbs stem from everyday existence as people relate to their actual life-worlds. The presence of these general proverbial sayings emphasises that intensified or paradoxical proverbs (to be discussed below) find their setting in the context of day-to-day life. The predominantly practical orientation of most proverbs in the Synoptics constitutes the context from which the paradox and hyperbole arise and which determines their meaning.

In the case of most Synoptic sayings, proverbial wisdom is tremendously concentrated and intensified. The primary means of intensification are paradox and hyperbole. The following sayings of Jesus can be classified as paradoxes or hyperboles of this kind: 'Whoever loses his life will preserve it' (Luke 17:33; cf Mark 8:35; John 12:25); and 'Love your

enemies, do good to those who hate you' (Luke 6:27; cf Matthew 5:44). In these instances the use of paradox and hyperbole endeavours to shake up the audience in their preservation of an existing coherent and undisturbed view of life.

The salient usage of proverbs in the sayings and discourses of Jesus thus fulfills various important functions. Even the somewhat colloquial and conventional proverbs become important, reminding one that faith needs to relate to people's everyday lives and circumstances. This observation also rests on the notion that one needs to make a meaningful and integrated whole of one's existence. The intensifying function of the proverb by means of paradox and hyperbole indeed has the opposite effect in that it disturbs the minds of the hearers and so jolts them out of their complacency. Thus Jesus provides us with an example for inculturation, in which proverbs play an indispensable and effective role.

Conclusion

Faith is caught rather than taught. That is why the Christian faith has to be inculturated in every society, including African societies. African proverbs, particularly on account of their metaphorical nature, are useful tools for 'catching' the Christian faith.

Joshua Kudadjie (1995:19) provides us with a list of advantages of using African proverbs in African congregations, which aptly summarises the essence of this paper:

> The citing of relevant proverbs makes the audience interested, stay awake, pay keen attention, get involved by using their imagination, enjoy the message, remember it, and see themselves agreeing with the truth being preached. It is because of these advantages that Jesus himself used proverbial sayings frequently. And he succeeded in getting his hearers to understand and respond to his message – even if they did not always accept it.

May African Christians and those who are in dialogue with them live up to the expectations of the following Oji proverb: 'When the occasion comes, the proverb comes.'

It will behove us well to remember the following: 'If you wish to live wisely, ignore sayings – including this one' (Laurence Peter).

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Traditional proverbs on marriage as a communication bridge between the Christian Gospel and the Bemba of Zambia

P A Bennett

Introduction: the problem and the challenge

The purpose of this article is to report what we are doing with Bemba proverbs and why we are doing it. I am a North American Christian missionary teaching at the Theological College of Central Africa in Ndola, Zambia. Our purpose at the college is to train men and women to go out and be ministers of the gospel, predominantly in Zambia, but also in other regions of southern and Central Africa. One of our greatest concerns at the college is being relevant to felt needs and cultural values. One of the greatest needs we have had revealed to us is for a deeper, more genuine conversion to Christian values in the Zambian cultural context.

The question is: How do we communicate biblical values, the values contained in the gospel, at a people's worldview level? I suggest that we must find a window, an access point, into their worldview. One window into a people's worldview can be found and developed through an analysis of their traditional proverbial lore. Once we have sufficiently understood the nature of the window, we can then build communication bridges through thiswindow between worldview values and biblical values. This communication bridge has a reciprocal dynamic: it serves as a conduit for informing the gospel communicator of the deepest traditional values held by the people and has the potential to effect permanent and positive change, and restoration of comprehensive wellbeing in the recipient's belief and behaviour system. To this end, we will look at traditional proverbs as a window into worldview, critical contextualisation as a communication bridge methodology, our Bemba proverbs project report, and Bemba proverbs on marriage: traditional and biblical values in dialogue.

Traditional proverbs as a window into worldview

Because proverbs encode a people's 'philosophical outlook, religious conceptions and worldview ... in a digestible form' (Brookman-Amissah

1986:75), they serve, if decoded properly, as an effective source for discovering the way they perceive and process reality and their place in it (Van Rheenan 1991:33) and for revealing their values (Opoku 1987:58), philosophy, character, wisdom, beliefs, practices and soul (Nyembezi 1963:xii; Rattray 1914:5, 12; Dzobo 1973:13; Sumbwa 1993:iii; et al). Proverbs reflect 'even more clearly than other forms of folk-lore the deepest-set values of a people, showing the drives that motivate [moral] behaviour' (Herskovitz in Chima 1984:57), and reveal 'some of the fundamental determinants' of that behaviour (Dzobo 1973:12). Proverbs 'serve as keys to open the door into Africans' view of the nature of reality, the meaning of life, and the foundation of their value judgements' (Chima 1984:55), and they reveal 'African categories [pertaining to] concepts of man, society, the world and God'[1] (Shorter in Chima 1984:53). While many other voices[2] affirm that traditional proverbs provide a window into African worldview, these few should be enough to make the point.

Critical contextualisation as a communication bridge method

The method employed in this article is a slightly modified version of Hiebert's critical contextualisation model (1985:184–192) and includes some additional components from Schreiter's *Constructing local theologies* (1985). Instead of presenting Hiebert's four steps exclusively from a theoretical point of view, we will discuss them from the context in which they are being used.

First, we[3] have attempted to gather as uncritically as possible information about the old, traditional Bemba value system as it has been expressed in their proverbial lore (Hiebert 1985:186). Our gathering motive was conditioned by Schreiter's concept of listening to a culture so that it might open itself to us on its own terms. Although the proverbs we collected had already been written down and were 'safe', so to speak, from being tampered with by our preconceptions, we nevertheless attempted to maintain a listening sensitivity by gathering any and all proverbs no matter how they were expressed or what was said about them; we accepted them as we found them. Because the proverbs gathered varied in the amount of explanation given, we used Bemba theological college students and other local people as culturally inside informants who provided additional information as well

as clarification and correction of any proverbs that required it. Though the use of these culturally inside informants enhances the emic dimension of the proverbs collection, our work is nevertheless etic (Harris 1976:341) in that the informants were required to speak within an etically established framework I set up.

Second, we have studied some biblical teachings identified by the informants which pertain to the various marital issues that have emerged from studying the proverbs (:186). Third, we have attempted to evaluate the traditional values expressed in the proverbs in the light of biblical teachings that address them (:186–187). Fourth, we have attempted to articulate a new set of marriage values that retain and affirms[4] what is consistent with biblical values, and redeem[5] by means of reformulation of distortions what can be modified into a marriage ethic that has explicit Christian meaning (:187–187). This redemption attempts to identify the underlying need that gave rise to a given proverb and addresses it from a biblical point of view. While we are employing all four of Hiebert's critical contextualisation steps in the Bemba proverbs project, in this article we are only presenting our work only to the first half of the fourth step. In other words, we will only go so far as to affirm the traditional values expressed in the Bemba proverbs we have selected for illustration. In a later work, we will conclude the exercise by applying the second half of the fourth step in which we will have biblical values confront traditional values with a view to reformulating the traditional values so that they reflect an 'authentic African identity' (Simfukwe 1995:1) and Christian values.

Finally, in the presentation of the proverbs below, the assertions are predominantly from my informants while the observations and questions are largely mine. I have restricted my comments to observations and questions only since I see myself as a facilitator whose task it is to assist Christian ministers in communicating with their people at the deepest level of personality and need; it is *their* task to answer the questions and thereby formulate a critically contextualised local theology of marriage that is relevant to the people's worldview and perceived needs.

Bemba Proverbs Project Report

How it all began and what we found

About a year ago, I became intensely interested in intercultural communication, worldview and proverbs all at the same time. This came about for two reasons. First, I was scheduled to teach a course on Cross-Cultural Communication and another on Biblical Proverbs. One of the course requirements I developed for the Proverbs class was for each student to go out and collect at least 50 proverbs from among their people group. Because our college is in a city, I told the students they could find proverbs from published collections if they could not find someone who could give them the proverbs orally. The students found hardly any proverbs collections were available. Second, because I was doing studies with the University of South Africa (Unisa) in the area of intercultural communication, I became convinced of three things: to be effective, the gospel must be communicated at worldview level (Van Rheenan 1990:90); a people's worldview is one of the most difficult areas (if not the most difficult) to discover, especially for a cultural outsider like myself; and traditional proverbs provide one of the easiest[6] and best access points into the African worldview (Chima 1984:57). Armed with these three assumptions, I set out to find as many Zambian proverbs as possible, primarily for myself, but also for my students. My goal was to learn something about the Zambian worldview so that I, and my students as well, might become a better communicator of the gospel. To my dismay, the proverbs were extremely hard to locate. I could find only one purchasable collection of Zambian proverbs, published in 1993, and it aimed at the popular reader. Further scratching around revealed that many more were extant but physically difficult to acquire. So, to minimise my agony, I decided to focus only on Bemba proverbs, since it is the language group in which I live and work. However, the task was no easier. For months, I visited libraries, missions, schools, churches and individuals hoping I might be fortunate enough to find one good collection of Bemba proverbs in English. I found no exhaustive compendium of Bemba proverbs that gave translations, usages and other ethnographic details. Instead I found, and have in my possession, the following which I am editing and collating into what I believe will be the largest collection of Bemba proverbs in existence[7]:

White Fathers' Bemba-English dictionary, 1947 and 1991.
This dictionary, which has undergone at least two revisions I know of (1947, 1954 and 1991), contains approximately 800 proverbs in the vernacular with English translations, but, since they are not compiled by themselves anywhere in the dictionary, they must be painstakingly excised page by page.

Icibemba na mano yaciko, 1963 [1955], by S. Mpashi.
Mpashi's work is all in Bemba and presents over 700 proverbs listed alphabetically. His comments are quite brief.

Amapinda mulyashi, 1958, by P B Mushindo.
This book, written in the vernacular, contains a few proverbs discussed as a conversational phenomenon.

Munshifika ku bwingi: tapeelwa shina, Parts 1 and 2, 1968, by E Hoch.
This collection is in two volumes and contains 1 234 proverbs in Bemba and interpretively translated into English. Part 1 lists the proverbs alphabetically and part 2 arranges them topically.

Bantu wisdom, 1970, by J T Milimo.
Milimo presents 559 proverbs from ten Central African Bantu groups (Bemba, Chewa, Lala, Lozi, Lunda, Luvale, Sena, Shona, Tonga and Tumbuka). They are given in the vernacular and are translated into English with a topical arrangement. Some explanations are included.

50 proverbs: traditional and Christian wisdom, 1980, by W E Lane.
Lane offers 50 proverbs from nine Central African Bantu groups (Bemba, Chewa, Lala, Lozi, Lunda, Luvale, Sena, Tonga and Tumbuka). They are arranged topically and have explanations largely from a Christian point of view.

Ubulungu tabupita pakafundo: Intulo yamapinda nensoselo shamano, 1982, by S S Mulenga.
Mulenga presents his material exclusively in Bemba and has arranged it in three sections of which only the first has over 230 proverbs all arranged alphabetically. Each proverb is followed by a paragraph of explanation.

Proverbs: tools for worldview studies – an exploratory comparison of the Bemba of Zambia and the Shona of Zimbabwe, Volume I 1982, by Larry L Niemeyer.
Niemeyer's work is an MA thesis in anthropology in which his discussion of proverbs rests primarily in Kearney's worldview universals. Appended to the thesis are 1 286 Bemba proverbs drawn almost totally from Hoch's 1968 collection mentioned above; however, Niemeyer's collection differs significantly from Hoch's in that his translations are literal, not interpretive.

La saggezza di ng'andu, 1990, by U Davoli.
Davoli's work is a blessing and a curse; on the one hand it contains 2 105 proverbs, the largest collection of Bemba proverbs I have found, it is translated into Italian. While it presents the proverbs in Bemba, their explanations are accessible only to an Italian readership. The first three parts of the book have the proverbs arranged topically while the fourth part has them arranged alphabetically.

The dancing elephant, 1992, by U Davoli.
This book of Bemba folk tales in English contains approximately 70 proverbs. The proverbs are given in English in the text of the tales, but are footnoted in Bemba.

Zambian proverbs, 1993, by N Sumbwa.
Sumbwa presents a collection of 249 proverbs by language group (Bemba, Kaonde, Lozi/Luyana, Luvale, Nyanja and Tonga). Each entry includes the proverb in vernacular, a literal translation, meaning, usage and implication/comment.

A Bemba grammar with exercises, s a, by E Hoch.
The proverbs contained in this grammar text appears to add no new proverbs to what have already been given in the *White Fathers' Bemba-English dictionary* and *Munshifika ku bwingi* mentioned above.

Current status of the project

The collection of Bemba proverbs I am working on now contains 2 686

proverbs; however, the number will decrease as the editing continues; there are many redundancies because of spelling and dialectal differences. After I had collated all the proverbs, and the translations and explanations which were already in English, I passed them on to five theological college students who know the Bemba language and culture. Their task was to translate and explain all the proverbs that needed it and to make any editorial changes they felt were necessary (sense, usage, punctuation, spelling, grammar, etc.). Now that they have finished, I will integrate all their contributions into one collection that will contain approximately 2 200 proverbs.

We foresee the project consisting of six phases. Phase 1 involved collating all the information from twelve previously published sources. Phase 2 involved four theological college students in editing and expanding phase 1. Phase 3 involved collating an additional three previously published sources with the completed phase 2. Phase 4, completed during the first week of September 1995, involved five theological college students in a repeat of phase 2. Phase 5, now in progress, involves collating the results of phase 4, and should be finished by the end of October. Phase 6 will entail a proof-reading and revision of phase 5 by some other older Bemba theological college students and, it is hoped, will be completed by the end of November 1995.

Bemba proverbs on marriage: traditional and biblical values in dialogue

Why the theme of marriage?

The theme of marriage has been selected for several reasons. First, marriage is one of the most important, if not *the* most important, social concerns for the Bemba. Most of Bemba life revolves around marriage and closely related issues. Second, the Bemba, as well as other Bantu groups, are people who prize the maintenance of good relationships, and marriage is one of the most important relationships one can have. Third, marriage is one the areas of greatest social trouble, especially as the Bemba urbanise. Dislocation from the rural and traditional environment of the ancestral home and relocation in the urban and highly Westernised, multi-ethnic and multi-

valued city have brought untold confusion about the roles and responsibilities in marriage. Fourth, partly because of urbanisation and partly because of traditional sexual practices, Aids is devastating not just the population in general, but marriage in particular. Fifth, marriage is a universal phenomenon to which all cultures of the world can relate. Sixth, marriage is a significant biblical theme. Seventh, marriage is a biblical metaphor for the Church, and its interpretation as such not only has significant implications for the biblical understanding of the Church, but also has a reciprocal impact on the Bemba Christian concept of what marriage ought to be. Eighth, marriage is a relevant topic for theological college students who are training for the ministry, since marital issues and marital counselling constitute one of the most significant needs in church life today. While these are not necessarily all the reasons that the theme of marriage could be selected, they at least serve as a preliminary justification for studying the topic. In other words, marriage is a critical issue traditionally and theologically.

The scope

I have found over two hundred proverbs that deal directly or indirectly with marriage issues. They touch on such topics as adultery (including the temptation to and consequences of), various marital troubles, fertility and barrenness, partner selection, in-laws, divorce and remarriage, care of husband, polygamy, polyandry, marital unity, widowhood, child custody, pre-marital sex, love, family resemblance, membership in a new family, pre-marital counseling and marriage agent betrayal. However, the scope of this article prohibits the treatment of any large number of these. Therefore, I am limiting myself to a few significant proverbs my informants think are good examples for the critical contextualisation exercise. Five proverbs are used as primary examples. The full spectrum of proverbs on marriage will be dealt with in a forthcoming work.

The presentation

Before we look at the proverbs themselves, let me say a couple of things about the presentation of the proverbs in this paper. First, the reader will

notice that many of the proverbs are separated into two parts by a colon. Because proverbs are fundamentally speech acts (Yanga 1977) and not literary creations, we should make every effort to retain the speech act signals. The colon, in those proverbs that contain it, separates the opening formula of *prompter* from the *response* or completion[8]. Second, each proverb is endnoted so that the literary sources[9] for each proverb along with the names of my informants might be cited. These sources are given because the collection of Bemba proverbs from which these were gathered is designed as a research resource for student use and, for students to use it, had to have a ready-reference system by which to locate the original sources from which we gathered the collection. Because the proverbs come from approximately fifteen different sources, there was no other way to cite the sources for each proverb other than include the source citation immediately with its corresponding proverb.

The categories

Bemba marriage generally involves the following: interest in marriage or the opposite sex, engagement (which includes negotiations, marriage agent, commitment gift, etc), courtship (which includes visits to and by the families as well as the prospective husband working for the prospective wife's family to prove his worth), the ceremony, family expectations/ obligations, children and life together. Divorce, death, survivor cleansing (breaking the spiritual bond between the survivor and the deceased) and widowhood are not seen as positive dimensions of marriage, but are nevertheless part and parcel of the marriage continuum. In the presentation below we will look at the categories of engagement, children, family ties and adultery. Concluding the presentation are some additional proverbs.

The proverbs

In this section, I will present each proverb with translations, meanings and other ethnographic details (in a forthcoming work I hope to add a 'bridge-point' discussion. We call it a bridge-point because our aim is to build communication bridges between biblical values and Bemba values.) At this point, however, we are not ready to build the bridges, but are attempting to

establish through observation and question a beginning point where we may start laying the first foundation stones for the bridges.

Engagement

Abaanakashi: maafi yampombo[10]
Literally translated, this proverb says 'Women are droppings of a duiker', and it means women are as plentiful as duikers' droppings. The duiker-dropping metaphor draws on the observation that in the bush when one comes upon duikers' droppings, they are in abundance. Duikers tend to use favourite places for leaving their droppings; therefore, when one finds some, one finds much more nearby. Furthermore, duikers' dropping are small pellets, making their appearance seem even more numerous.

This proverb has two main usages which are basically antithetical. Used positively, this proverb is given as advice to a young man who is either growing impatient about his marriage prospects or has been rejected for marriage by a girl or her family. In this case, the proverb essentially says something like 'Do not worry about finding a wife; they are as plentiful as stars in the sky, sand on the sea shore or leaves on the trees; you will eventually find one.' The eventuality of finding a mate[11] is affirmed by two other proverbs: *Takwaba icibolya ca bashimbe,*[12] which literally translated says: 'There is no deserted village of unwed people,' and interpretively translated says, 'An old village site which was inhabited only by unmarried people has not been found'; *Banamune : tabasha mpanga,*[13] which literally translated says, 'Marriageable young women do not leave the forest,' and interpretively translated says, 'Marriageable young women are found everywhere.'

Used negatively, *Abaanakashi maafi yampombo* is employed by a man who is so unhappy with his wife that he feels it is necessary to threaten her either with divorce or with taking a second wife. According to this usage, the proverb means: 'Because women are as plentiful as duikers' droppings, I can chase you away and find a replacement.'

Akaliimo ushishi: takatwalwa ku buko[14]
Translated literally, this proverb says, 'The little work you do not under-

stand is not taken to the in-law,' and translated interpretively it says, 'The small work you do not understand well should not be offered to your mother-in-law,' and means one should not boast of pretentious achievements, not to mention genuine achievement, since that boasting might bring trouble.[15] This proverb is applied to a young man who is trying to do something in which he has had little or no experience for the sole purpose of impressing his potential in-laws.[16] Customarily, before a marriage is approved, the husband-to-be goes to live with the family of the wife-to-be and undergoes a time of testing. During this time his behaviour is observed very closely and one of the areas of greatest scrutiny is how he works. If he is an industrious worker, he will be approved; if, however, he is lazy, dull or incompetent, he risks disapproval, and the marriage may be called off.[17] Hence the pressure to do well is great. Under these circumstances, some young men are tempted to make it appear they are more skilled than they really are. However, the Bemba do not value pretence in these matters. As this proverb suggests, it is better to admit inability, endure the possibility of criticism and learn, rather than pretend to have expertise and embarrass everyone by failure.

Children

Icifwaikwa mwifungu: lisembe[18]
This proverb literally translated says, 'What you look for under the bed is an axe' and means that the purpose of marriage is bearing children. This proverb is used to encourage couples to multiply their families through bearing many children. As the following three proverbs illustrate, the Bemba, like all Bantu, prize large families: *Akashama kali kamo: twasanguka twaba tubili*[19] which literally translated says, 'The groundnut was alone; they became two' and interpretively translated says, 'While the groundnut was once alone, now it has become two' and means the hope of marriage is having many children. *Ubuta bumo: tabwisusha ng'anda*[20] translated literally says, 'One placenta does not fill a house' and means that there is always room in the home for more children. *Ubukulu bwa nkoko: masako*[21] translated literally says 'The greatness of a chicken is its feathers' and translated interpretively says 'The feathers of a cock demonstrate its size.' It means that, as feathers of a chicken add to its bulk, so children add to the honour and respect given to parents.

According to Bemba tradition, if no children are born to a couple within an appropriate period of time, the marriage can be nullified. This proverb implicitly teaches that marital security is contingent upon having children as the following two proverbs illustrate: *Icikalilwa pa nsaka: musumba wa bwali*[22] which translated literally says, 'That which let a few days go by at the rest hut is the large basket of *nshima*.'[23] and translated interpretively says, 'Hope for food is what persuades a person to stay on at the rest hut' and means the hope of children keeps a married couple together. *Kukwata kana kamo: kutanganina na Lesa*[24] translated literally says, 'Having only one child is having the same task as God' Translated interpretively it says, 'Having only one child is contending with God', meaning that there is no security in having only one child because God could take it, leaving the family childless.

In fact, having no children is a formula for poverty as the following proverb attests: *Ing'anda ishibwelela mpango: ibusa*,[25] which translated literally says, 'A house without a lobola[26] is poor.' It means that a family without daughters will not receive the 'bride-wealth', primarily in the form of work done for them by the son-in-law-to-be, and will thereby be impoverished.

Family ties

Icupo ecilipa mutwe: umukowa eo usesha[27]
Translated literally, this proverb says, 'Marriage is the one on your head; the clan is the one you move.' Translated interpretively it says, 'You carry your marriage honourably on your head[28], but your clan you move about commonly with the hand.' It means that some women give greater honour to their husbands and their children than to their clan. This proverb is applied to a wife who ignores her clan relations in favour of her immediate family and teaches that clan relationships should be valued at least as much as marital relationships. In fact, according to Bemba tradition, failure to maintain good clan relationships can result in a terminated marriage as the following proverb suggests. *Wilabilila ku bantu bobe: icupo cibusa*[29] translated literally says, 'Do not forget your people; marriage is friendship;' translated interpretively it says, 'You should not forget about your people, because marriage is just a friendship' means that married people should not neglect or abandon their relatives. While marriage can be

perceived as a friendship that can be broken, family relationships cannot.[30] This proverb is applied to a married couple as a warning against giving greater allegiance to the marital union than to the clan and implicitly teaches that the priority should be reversed, namely the clans from which they came are more vital entities than the spouses. It also teaches that a marriage can be damaged, if not terminated, if relationships with the extended family and the clan are not positively maintained.

The following four proverbs illustrate some ways of maintaining positive family relationships: *We muko wandi: umucinshi waba mukanwa*[31] literally says 'You, my in-laws, respect is in the mouth,' and means respect for your in-laws is measured or judged by what you say to and about them and how you say it. This proverb is applied to a person who is found speaking disrespectfully about the in-laws and teaches that, because words are powerful, when talking to an in-law you had better use your words wisely so as to avoid being perceived as rude or disrespectful;

Ubuko bwatinine insamfwe[32] literally says, 'The in-laws feared the *insamfwe'* (a tiny mushroom) and means in-laws should never be too near each other. This proverb is applied to in-laws who, because of too close a proximity,[33] have seen each other's weaknesses and mistakes, have become disappointed and are beginning to lose respect for each other. It teaches the traditional value that for in-laws to maintain respectful relationships with each other, they should keep their distance, especially when a marriage is new.

Ku buko ni kwikoshi: bafwenako libili[34] literally says, 'In-laws are the neck; they scratch it twice,' and interpretively says, 'The in-laws are like the back of the neck; one scratches there many times.' It means you must think twice (scratch your neck twice, to clarify the metaphor) before undertaking anything against your relatives if you want to be at peace with them. Also, a divorce should not make you become disrespectful to former in-laws; respect them as you did before.[35]

Adultery

Intekwe imo: icita icifine[36]
This proverb literally says, 'One container of snuff causes one to sneeze'

and means having sex with one partner causes boredom. This proverb is used to encourage or excuse extra-marital affairs, and it implicitly teaches that variety[37] in one's sex life is achieved by a multiplicity of partners. However, if one chooses to become involved in an adulterous affair, as the following proverb suggests, it should be done away from one's neighbourhood in order to preserve community harmony by avoiding being caught. *Ubucende maafi: batwalo kutali*[38] literally says, 'Adultery is dung; they always go far away.' Interpretively it says, 'Adultery is like faeces; one goes far away to relieve oneself hoping to keep it a secret.' It means that, because adultery or fornication are as bad as faeces, which cannot be kept near people because of the filth and smell, they must be committed far away from one's community.

Fornication, which is later identified as adultery when it takes place with married people, is actually encouraged in young people as the following proverb illustrates: *Umwana wa ng'wena : akulila kwitete*[39] literally says, 'The young crocodile grows in the reeds' and means it is essential for young people to experiment with sex so that they learn about it for later life.

Conclusion

While my student and community informants assure me that we are beginning to plumb the depths of the Bemba worldview, as yet we have no objective evidence that we have actually transmitted life-changing and culturally and personally relevant biblical values to people characterised by the Bemba worldview. Nevertheless, the Bemba proverbs project team see, and some of us for the first time, that biblical and Bemba ethical values need each other in a mutually enriching dialogue. In other words, Bemba worldview values need affirmation where they agree with biblical values and confrontation where they radically disagree. On the other hand, the gospel communicator and biblical values need to be challenged to speak relevantly to the people's needs because often both come clothed in alien worldview values and theologies. We hope, as time passes, and the project progresses towards completion, that we will see some evidence of having built a bridge between biblical and Bemba values. In fact, we will soon be holding a relationship enrichment seminar at the theological college, and

we will use Bemba proverbs on marriage to help the male participants (who seem to be more reluctant) to open up and feel free to discuss sexuality in marriage. We are doing so because a recent survey of the students reveals that approximately 70 per cent of them feel sexual issues are a critical concern for marriage, but they do *not* want to discuss them openly in a seminar. We are hoping that the proverbs will connect with traditional values regarding Zambian sexual mores and will be an acceptable approach for seminar discussion because the proverbs will apply indirectly to the participants, thereby making them detached and comfortable with discussing otherwise embarrassing issues.

The Bemba Proverbs Project and the critical contextualisation reflections presented in this article are only in the germinal stage. After we finish all the steps of the critical contextualisation process, we hope to have produced a locally relevant and biblically sound theology of marriage.

Notes

1 Interestingly, these four conceptual categories correspond almost perfectly with the four relational categories mentioned above in which all people need to experience a restoration of comprehensive wellbeing (compare self with others/nature/God with man/society/world/God).

2 Barra 1960; Forward; Hamutyinei & Plangger 1974:13; Katowa 1991:3; Kraft 1979:234–235; Schreiter 1985:77; Van Rheenan 1991:33; to mention a few.

3 In the discussion of methodology, the term 'we' denotes a group of about six researchers composed of myself as a missionary teacher and five Zambian theological college students. Though I am the one responsible for this article, the research and results are the product of our team's work. In this project, I see myself not as a teacher or a teller, but as a learner and listener, as a facilitator whose primary function is enquirer and compiler. The goal is for our students, and others through their work, to become local theologians (Schreiter 1985) who communicate the gospel relevantly among their own people.

4 We retain what is consistent with biblical teachings based on the premise that God has made himself known to all cultures through general revelation (Romans 1:20), 25, 11–16; Acts 14:17) and he has not allowed that witness to be completely obliterated (Kraft 1979:218). In other words, evidence of God's influence for wholeness and wellbeing is found in traditional proverbs apart from any Christian

evangelistic effort.

5 When I originally set out to accomplish this fourth step in critically contextualising Bemba proverbs, I envisioned three responses instead of the present two. I thought there would be proverbs that would be good, bad or ugly, or retained, rejected and redeemed. But on further reflection, especially when trying to understand the underlying reason for a proverb's existence, I came to believe that no proverb, or the underlying value or motive it reveals, is beyond the touch of redemption. In other words, no matter how bad a proverb may appear on the surface, within the motive of its creation is a hurt, or a need that cries out for healing and wholeness, or a restoration of comprehensive wellbeing.

6 I say 'easiest' because proverbs, though many, are quite brief in content when compared with myths, legends, rituals, songs and poems. I am not saying they are the 'easiest' in terms of analysis, interpretation, understanding and application.

7 I have listed the collections by date of publication instead of alphabetically in order to give some idea of the historical flow of Bemba proverbs collection and publication.

8 While I have found no specific terminology used to identify the two parts of the proverb or the colon that separates them, Prof Mubanga Kashoki, Professor of African Languages at the Institute of African Studies in Lusaka, Zambia, has offered 'prompter' and 'response'. Whether the colon and the two parts signify a formal method of proverb transmission is uncertain at this time.

9 Instead of saying *White fathers' Bemba dictionary* under each proverb contributed to it, I have simply abbreviated it to the initials WFBED.

10 Mpashi 1963:1; Milimo 1970:22; Davoli 1990:209; Hoch 1968:6; Bupe.

11 Impatience about marriage is also found in the girls, as the following proverb illustrates: *Abaume ni nyanje: tabapwa kubuta* (Davoli 1990:210; Niemeyer 1982:271; Hoch 1968:6; Bupe) translated literally says: 'Men are maize; they never end' and translated interpretively says: 'Young men are like maize; there is no end to them.'

12 Mpashi 1963:56; WFBED 1947:149; Hoch 1968:92; Davoli 1990:340; Niemeyer 1982:319; Mukwavi.

13 Davoli 1990:203; Hoch 1968:21; Niemeyer 1982:279; Bupe.

14 Mpashi 1963:4; WFBED 1947:390; Davoli 1990:214; Hoch 1968:9; Mubanga; Zulu; Chitata; Niemeyer 1982:273.

15 Compare the rather recent yet nevertheless proverbial saying, 'Big boast, big roast.'

16 Compare the English proverbs, 'Don't bite off more than you can chew', and 'Your eyes are bigger than your stomach'.

17 The young man's fear is not unwarranted as the following proverb indicates: *Nkobekela: tecupo* (Simabaya; Zulu) literally says, 'Engagement is not marriage', and it means that because engagement is not marriage, it can be broken off at any time. While this proverb implies a high regard for the institution of marriage, it nevertheless has the potential for exacerbating a spirit of fear in the man who wants very much to please his intended in-laws.

18 Mulenga 1982:22; Davoli 1990:247; Mukwavi; Chama.

19 Hoch 1968:13; Niemeyer 1982:275; Bupe.

20 WFBED 1947:108; 1991:6 2 Davoli 1990:352; Hoch 1968:101; Niemeyer 1982:324; Mukwavi.

21 Mpashi 1963:60; Davoli 1990:348; Hoch 1968:98; Niemeyer 1982:323; Bupe; Mukwavi.

22 Mpashi 1963:17; Davoli 1990:247; Hoch 1968:32; Niemeyer 1982:285; Chama.

23 'Nshima', also called 'bwali', is a thickened mush made from boiled maize-meal and is the staple food of the Bemba.

24 WFBED 1947:1355; Hoch 1968:66; Niemeyer 1982:304; Chama.

25 Mpashi 1963:24; Hoch 1968:56; Niemeyer 1982:299; Chama.

26 'Lobola' is a fairly generic term used throughout most of Zambia and denotes the 'bride-price' or 'bride-wealth' that is paid to the parents of the bride.

27 Chitata; Zulu; *Icupo wasenda pa mutwe: umukowa, eo wasesha ku minwe* in Davoli 1990:241 which literally translated says: 'Marriage you carry on your head; the clan you carry with your fingers'; Chama; Mukwavi; Mubanga.

28 Compare *Icupo walemene ng'ana* (Chama; Mubanga; *Icupo walemene nkata* in Davoli 1990:241) which literally translated says, 'Marriage you make a headpad',

and interpretively translated says, 'For your marriage, you make a headpad for carrying a load, but for others you do not make such provisions.'

29 Davoli 1990:407; Chitatu; Zulu; Chama.

30 Compare the English proverb, 'Blood is thicker than water', which has essentially the same meaning.

31 Chitata; Zulu.

32 Davoli 1990:348; Chitata; Zulu.

33 Compare the English proverb, 'Familiarity breeds contempt.'

34 Mpashi 1963:39; WFBED 1947:78; Davoli 1990:281; Niemeyer 1982:304; Chitata; Zulu.

35 Compare *Ubuko bwakale: tabuloba* (Bupe) which literally says, 'Former in-law relationships do not become extinct', and means when you marry into a particular family, you enter into an everlasting relationship. This proverb is used to encourage a man or woman who once married into a particular family to continue relating positively to that family, and it teaches that a family bond is created in marriage such that even death or divorce cannot break it.

36 Mulenga 1982:44; Davoli 1990:270; Chama.

37 Compare the English proverb, 'Variety is the spice of life', which can also be used to excuse extramarital affairs.

38 Mpashi 1963:59; Davoli 1990:346; Hoch 1968:96; Niemeyer 1982:321; Bupe; Mukwavi.

39 Mpashi 1963:81; Davoli 1990:386; Hoch 1968:130; Niemeyer 1982:342; Zulu.

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The work of evangelisation and the gathering of proverbs

George Cotter

Introduction

I became interested in African proverbs in 1960 when I was studying the Kisukuma language to work with the Sukuma people of Tanzania. In the course of the year-long programme I was given much time to visit homes and make conversation with people. It gave me great pleasure to see how genuinely the people laughed when I used one of their proverbs. Often they gave me proverbs in return. I always wrote them down and by the time the year was up I had produced a booklet of 100 Sukuma proverbs with English translations.

In my second year in Tanzania I was assigned to a country mission and given the work of preparing catechumens for baptism. At that time the catechumens would spend three full months at the mission station studying. I realised I could not listen to my own voice for three months. That would drive me crazy. So I decided we would have a three-month conversation about the Bible.

There is a biblical proverb, also present in Sukuma, which says, 'One sows, another reaps.' Before I arrived in Tanzania the White Fathers had published two books in Sukuma. One was called a *Little Bible*. It was a reduced, simplified version of the Bible. The other book was called *Words of the Kingdom of God*. It was a harmony of the Gospels. In our baptism classes we would read passages from those books and discuss them. To get the people talking I often started the class with a proverb or two, for example, 'That which does the cultivating is in the stomach.' Of course they would agree that a person cannot work hard without eating first and then we would go on to see that a person could not live a Christian life without first getting the Word of the Lord in himself or herself. Then to challenge them further I would pantomime a person putting a piece of meat in his mouth and swallowing without chewing it. They would insist it has to be chewed first. And from there we would go back to the Bible with the question: Who is going to chew the food? Do you want me to chew it for you or should

you chew it for yourself? Such foolishness helped them to relax and to feel the burden of understanding was on them. Sometimes big talkers took over. I learned to let them! Often the big talkers did not have very good ideas. But those who had good ideas would get the courage to speak after listening to them.

Proverbs and practical evangelisation

So we would read a passage from one of our books, and I would give two or three proverbs to get them talking and looking for proverbs relevant to the Gospel passages. We usually had lively discussions about the meaning of the proverbs and whether or not they went with the Gospels. People from different areas had different understandings of the same proverb. When the people were relaxed enough they spontaneously suggested more proverbs which I immediately wrote down. The way we conducted the discussions was to have one person read through a parable or miracle story, then go back and read one or two sentences then wait. I would have a proverb or two ready to start the discussion, then he would read another sentence and little by little the people would come into the conversation. It was not unusual to spend a whole hour on one passage.

While doing this work I often quoted Jesus's words, 'like a householder who bring forth from his pantry new things and old'. I suppose he meant new things would be like vegetables or fresh meat, and old things like dry food, corn, beans, etc. It was always good for an argument to ask the people which is the new and which the old, the Gospels or proverbs?

Once when we were discussing the glory of the resurrection of Jesus, an old woman mumbled something that made everybody laugh. When they quietened down I wanted to know what she had said. It was a riddle: 'It went away naked and came back clothed.' The answer was a peanut or corn seed. From then on any time we discussed resurrection I used that proverb. And probably many people thought of resurrection when they were planting their corn or peanuts. This proverb is similar to what Jesus said: 'Unless the grain of wheat falling into the ground dies, it remains alone. But if it dies it brings forth much fruit.' But it is different in that in the Sukuma proverb the seed comes back transformed whereas the Gospel seed increases.

Brooklyn Bridge in New York is suspended from huge cables that are woven together from millions of small wires. These tiny wires support the heavy roadway that connects the two shores, allowing people to pass from one shore to another. I feel these wires are like proverbs, little things that tie the Lord to the people allowing revelation and prayer to pass back forth.

In the American *Webster's collegiate dictionary* two meanings are given for the verb evangelisation: to preach the Gospel, and to convert to Christianity. I do not like these meanings. For me evangelisation is carrying on the work of revelation that the Lord started with Abraham by revealing himself and his plans. This work is basically done by the Holy Spirit. The idea of one person evangelising or converting another is repulsive. We all need evangelising. In the example that Jesus gave of kneading the yeast into the dough there are several elements. Surely the yeast is the Word of God, but dough also contains flour, water, salt and perhaps other things. Because evangelisation is done by the Holy Spirit, it is directed to all people. So, if one group contains old people and young, men and women, black and white people, educated and uneducated, the Lord speaks to them all. Each takes from his message what he or she can. At one community way out in the bush the best reader for our books was a boy, ten years old. The first day he read the story of the rising of the son of the widow of Naim. When we gathered the next day I asked the group what we had talked about the previous day. Our young reader repeated the story almost word for word. We were all greatly impressed. You might say: 'The whole synagogue was filled with astonishment'! I have had discussions with communities mostly made up of men. They were very heavy. I have had discussions with groups mostly made up of women. They were very light and frivolous. But when the groups were equally balanced we had discussions that were serious and meaningful and at the same time humorous and enjoyable.

It was wonderful to see how attentive the boys and girls were to the words of the old people. And how carefully the old people responded to the questions of the youngsters.

Often after sessions with the people I asked them: 'From whom did you learn the most? From me or from each other?' They always answered, 'From each other!' Which made me realise that they were gaining knowl-

edge and also faith. The group was bearing witness to the truth of the Scriptures. So when we held Gospel discussions it was primarily the Holy Spirit who was evangelising all of us. He was kneading the yeast into the dough, into all of us. As we know, the parable points to the whole loaf, the whole human family. I know that my faith was strengthened by the faith of the Sukuma and that I received many insights into the Gospels and the world.

It is probably necessary to add a rider here: proverbs are really for rural people who walk around on foot and who spend much time talking with their neighbours. They are for static societies. City people who live in dynamic societies get away from proverbs and prefer the mass media. In Ethiopia ten or twelve proverbs were read on the Oromo radio every Sunday. The announcer would just read one after another with no context. It made all the proverbs insipid, contributing very little to anybody's understanding.

Similarities in meaning in some Sukuma proverbs and the teachings of Christianity

I would like to take a look at some Sukuma proverbs that contained values found in Christianity that emerged in our discussions. (The numbers refer to proverbs quoted in our forthcoming books of Sukuma Proverbs.) But bear in mind that they should be used in a group of people with a certain context, either a Sukuma context or a biblical context. This may turn out insipid as it did on the Ethiopian radio unless we can picture for ourselves the respective contexts.

About marriage

'A person cannot taste marriage as one does cucumbers' (1260). Cucumbers grow wild in the countryside. A man or woman can pick one and taste it. If it tastes sour it is thrown away; if sweet, it is eaten. Marriage shouldn't be like that.

'If you meet a married couple frying their eyes at each other, don't put in your eye. It will burn' (1559). Frying eyes, like eggs, pictures a heated

argument. It is better not to interfere in such a case, but to let the couple work it out themselves.

'What a tall person has hung up a short person cannot take down' (157). This proverb was mentioned when we were discussing the thought from Genesis, 'What God has joined together let no man put asunder.'

General values

'The man who made the drum knows what is inside' (414). It is Sukuma custom for a drum maker to insert a small object into the drum before covering the top. This might be a stone, a piece of metal, a seed, a piece of bone or anything. He will do this when his disciples are not looking. The result is nobody but himself knows what is rattling in the drum. This goes nicely with the story of God's creating the world.

'The dog is very proud but he lays down in ashes' (1607). The dog struts around with his head and tail in the air. But his sleeping place is a pile of ashes. This is generally used for a proud young person who dresses beautifully but sleeps in a hovel. It goes nicely for people who think they are too important.

'The grasshopper carries her husband on her back and abandons her baby' (1608). Grasshoppers are often seen carrying another grasshopper. The meaning concerns the person who neglects an important thing to do something trivial, like the man in the Gospel who built new barns for his future harvests but neglected the things of God.

'Where you see the tail there is the mouse' (177). Sometimes the mouse is not seen but its tail is. Seeing the tail one knows there is a mouse present. Seeing the wonders of nature one knows there is a wonderful God.

'Elephants carry each other' (563). When one elephant is wounded two elephants will come to its sides and with their trunks help it along. If these great animals help each other in trouble, should not people do as much?

'Do not wipe your snot on the centre pole of the house' (639). Never insult the father who is the support of the whole family. Do not offend God.

'I pointed out to you the beautiful moon but all you saw was my finger' (630). Jesus showed the Pharisees a wonderful new way of life, but all they saw was an uneducated workman. We must try to see the beauties that are before us, nature, friends, nice food, good health, etc.

'The father of the family never does wrong' (682). Though he might do wrong there is nobody to correct him. People are not in a position to correct, criticise or complain against God.

'The docile child eats the nice food that was put aside' (699). As parents reward obedient children so God blesses those who listen to him.

'He set his hopes on the pot that was full of ashes' (1006). A man returned to his home to find visitors eating a hastily cooked meal. His wife offered him some but he refused. After the visitors left, he told her: 'Now cook me some porridge from the flour in the pot under the bed.' She answered: 'That is only ashes!' The proverb refers to somebody who put his hope in something false, perhaps like the man who loves money too much.

'The constant singer does not build a nest' (1067). This bird is an example of a person who spends too much time talking and not enough working. This is a Gospel theme of taking responsibility for one's life.

'To return the spear to the man passing out the roasted meat' (1610). When the meat is ready the appointed man will take pieces of it on a spear and pass them around to the gathering. At times a recipient will place a piece of his meat on his spear and return it to the distributor in thanksgiving. The idea is to make a return to God for his gifts.

'The thanks of a donkey is a kick' (1117). This underlines the common courtesy of saying thanks for favours received.

'You've got a snake in its hole, it will bite you' (1056). This is used for someone who has a child who is going bad. The child should be corrected before it brings trouble on the home. A similar Christian value is to correct bad habits before they bring trouble.

'That which goes into the stomach does not remain' (511). There is more to life than just eating. A person should seek truly valuable things.

'To rest the hoe does not mean one has stopped working' (1228). Because a person has left his or her Christian duty does not mean that he or she has abandoned God.

'Against the house of the best loved wife you will always find the old man's spear leaning' (179). A man will return again and again to something he likes. If a person likes the Word of God you will always find him with it.

'The singer is not the song maker' (1396). One gifted man or woman makes up the songs. But many people sing them. The Lord has given the revelation but all of us talk about it.

I did this work for 12 years and over time gathered a large number of proverbs expressing similar ideas to the Gospels. In 1970 we made a book of 1 600 proverbs. I have been out of Tanzania for 23 years but can still speak the language. A colleague and I have an arrangement to make another book of Sukuma proverbs. This will have between 6 000 and 7 000 entries. My friend has worked in Tanzania for 40 years and has been very active in gathering and translating proverbs. When we have this book ready we will make another book fixing the proverbs to New Testament passages. That work is mostly done already but our English translations need refining. Such a publication may prove very helpful in the inculturation of the Gospel.

Proverbs and evangelisation in Ethiopia

In 1985 I went to Ethiopia and started studying the Oromo language and collecting proverbs. Once again my hope was to do Gospel discussion work. But I was just too old to master the Oromo language. By assembling collections of proverbs and with the help of dedicated Oromos (and a computer!) I produced the book *Salt for stew* which contains 4 670 proverbs. My long-term goal was to publish a book in Oromo harmonising the four Gospels with Oromo proverbs. This was finished in 1992 and we called it *The ears do not understand, only the mind does*, following what Jesus had said, `He who has ears to hear, let him hear.' This has over 2 100 proverbs aligned to Gospel verses. The situation in Ethiopia is quite different from that of Tanzania. The Sukuma are eager to learn about the

Bible. I did not find that eagerness among the Oromo. This might be because of Ethiopia's ancient Christian tradition.

In this section I wish to give a line or two from the Gospels, followed by an Oromo proverb. Once again using our imagination to picture a context is very important. We will go chronologically through the Gospel story.

'On coming to the house, (the Magi) saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh' (Matthew 2:11). 'As coffee is not taken without a morsel, so a king is not visited without a gift ((2254)'. These numbers refers to the proverb number in *Salt for Stew*.)

'When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, "Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false"' (John. 1:47). 'While it is still baking on the griddle a man can recognize the bread that will satisfy him' (502).

'For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life' (John. 3:16). 'She had only one lamb and this one she slaughtered for her guest' (591)'

'Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I ever did"' (John. 4:39). 'A small path brings people to a large road' (1721).

'Simply let your "Yes" be "Yes", and your "No", "No"; anything beyond this comes from the evil one' (Matthew 5:37). 'Speech and a stick for the donkey are best when short' (1098).

'I tell you, though he will not get up and give him the bread because he is his friend, yet because of the man's persistence he will get up and give him as much as he needs' (Luke 11:8). 'By persevering the egg walks on legs' (10).

'No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money' (Matthew 6:24). 'The dog that eats at two houses will be eaten in between by a hyena' (1261).

'How can you say to your brother, "Let me take the speck out of your eye," when all the time there is a plank in your own eye?' (Matthew 7:4). 'The dog, not seeing its own back end, says to the goat, "Hold your tail down!"', (127).

'The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock' (Matthew 7:25). 'A house built by God does not collapse' (1743).

'What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are – the Holy One of God!' (Mark 1:24). 'Fools and madmen often speak the truth' (1346).

'The disciples went and woke him, saying, 'Master, Master, we're going to drown!' He got up and rebuked the wind and the raging waters; the storm subsided, and all was calm' (Luke 8:24). 'A person who understands bees knows how to handle them' (374).

Jesus replied, 'No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God' (Luke 9:62). 'A man should not catch a leopard by the tail. But if he catches one he doesn't let go' (829).

'Teacher,' said John, 'we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we tried to stop him, because he is not one of us.' 'Do not stop him,' Jesus said, 'for whoever is not against you is for you' (Luke 9:49,50). 'People who are thatching the same house do not steal straw from each other' (661).

I asked Roland Murphy, a scripture scholar, whether he thought gathering proverbs was related to evangelisation as traditionally understood. According to him the answer should be in the affirmative, as it is another way of approaching God by his revelation through nature.

Conclusion

In closing I would like to mention what I *received* from the work of evangelisation and the gathering of proverbs. It amazed me that the Sukuma people who are so different from me could hear what I considered the

Word of God and know that it was true. They reverenced it in the same way as I do. I have also done Gospel discussion work in Guatemala, the United States and Ethiopia. It is astonishing how these very different people recognise and accept the biblical word when brought to them in their own proverbs. From all of these years of reflecting on the Bible and the proverbs of various peoples the conviction has grown in me that God has a plan for the world and that it is revealed in the Bible. Knowing something of this makes life meaningful. The Greeks used to say 'The proper study of mankind is man.' But I think the proper study of humankind is God's plan for people, narrated in the Bible and in the ancient wisdom of proverbs.