

NOTES AND QUERIES

African fondness for proverbs is proverbial in itself.¹ Africans possess large stocks of proverbs and proverbial sayings which epitomize the philosophy of the race. The wisdom of the traditional African is otherwise gauged by his ability to cite and apply proverbs which he supplies for every conceivable incident in life.

Proverbs form an open sesame for the workings of the native mind, manners and customs, traditional wisdom, religion, ideas and ideals, feelings, modes of thought, principles of conduct, and philosophy. Proverbs show what qualities appeal to or attract the observations of African peoples, what values they prize and vices they censure. Proverbs also provide useful data for anthropologists, folklorists, historians, linguists, philosophers, and sociologists. Since time immemorial, proverbs have represented the code of African traditional laws; therefore they are used most forcibly in pleas before local courts of justice and at similar local gatherings. Africans also use proverbs to encourage or discourage some venture, to castigate, to lampoon, to deflate, to humor, to chide, or to praise someone according to how he behaves in society. Proverbs are one of the "four big possessions" of the Chaga of Tanzania (the other three being land, cattle, and water). Clearly, this shows the importance which the Chaga place on proverbs, and what is true of the Chaga is also true of other Africans.

The importance and value which Africans place on proverbs is reflected in African proverbs about proverbs. The following is a list of such proverbs, to which I have added parallels from non-African nations. The Birom, Idoma, and Igbo of Nigeria describe a proverb as the soup of speech. To the Birom, "The soup of speech is the proverb"; to the Idoma, "Proverbs are the palm oil with which words are chewed"; and their neighbors, the Igbo, say that a proverb is the "palm oil with which words are eaten." The Igbo also say, "The proverb is the leaf that they use to eat a word."

The same proverb also occurs in Arabic ("A proverb is to speech what salt is to food"), Hebrew ("What flowers are to gardens, spices to food, gems to a garment, and stars to heaven, such are proverbs interwoven in speech"), and Latin ("Proverbs are salt-pits from which you may extract salt and sprinkle it where you will Cicero").

The Ilaje of Nigeria describe proverb as the ornament of speech. The Persian version is, "Proverbs are the adornment of speech."

To the Yoruba (Nigeria), "A proverb is the horse of conversation; (thus) when the conversation droops, a proverb revives it." They go further to say that "Proverbs and conversation follow each other." While the Birom observe that "A speech without a proverb is the 'leper' of conversation," the Ovambo (Namibia) say that "A speech properly garnished with proverbs, parables, and wisdom is pleasant to hear," and the South African Zulu add, "Without them proverbs the language would be but a skeleton without flesh, a body without soul."

To the Jarawa of Nigeria, "A proverb summarizes (a long speech), for when a proverb is used, less is spoken again." In short, they say, "Proverbs end long talks." The Chinese have a cognate: "When one has read the book of proverbs, no effort is required to speak well again."

Proverbs are useful instruments for settling problems. For example, the Yoruba say: "It is he who is as familiar with proverbs as he is with the matter in hand who usually arbitrates." They also say in another proverb: "A wise man who knows proverbs well

reconciles difficulties" (cf. the Hindu proverb: "He who knows proverbs well can get out of almost any difficulty"). Finally, the Krobo (Ghana) declare: "Talking a palaver without proverbs is like spearing animals with a pointed raffia midrib; or like going on a journey without rice in your bag."

The use of proverbs is so crucial in conversation among the Igbo that a curse is placed on anyone who discourages an Igbo man from employing them in his conversation. Thus: "He who advises me not to employ proverbs when speaking, may he climb palm trees without the climbing rope."

We are told in a Jarawa proverb that "A proverb monger laughs at him who knows no proverbs, for he can use proverbs to sell him who knows no proverbs." Likewise, the Hausa (Nigeria) say: "A proverb maker, lover of quarrelling; who answers him excels him."

The Igbo version of the English, "If the cap fits, wear it," is, "When a proverb is spoken about a wasted basket, the thin man understands (because it refers to him)."

In a similar vein, the Ilahe conclude that anyone to whom a proverb refers, and who pretends not to understand is a coward. Thus, they say, "He who does not understand a proverb alluding to him, is nothing but a coward." This proverb also occurs among the Igbira. But the Edo of Nigeria have something slightly different; they say, "A person who makes a proverb about someone else, and who himself does not understand the meaning of the proverb, is afraid of the ensuing quarrel (fight)."

Is the making of proverbs exclusive to certain groups of people? Who may make or quote proverbs? The Idoma answer these questions in the following proverb:

A man who sees a proverb is the one who quotes the proverb.

And the Igala (Nigeria):

It is the eye that sees proverbs that will say them.

In both examples, the idea is that anyone can make or quote proverbs. It is not the monopoly of either the elders or the royal family alone, but is common property. The Yoruba, however, think somewhat differently, for when a Yoruba youth wishes to quote a proverb, he must first obtain permission to do so from the elders present.

A number of African proverbs recognize the fact that proverbs do not just arise, but emerge from something. For example, while the Agbiede of Nigeria say, "Proverbs come from world events," the Ashanti say that, "When the occasion comes, the proverb comes." This means that certain events of life evoke the creation of proverbs. The Edo say, "It is what one sees that he makes a proverb from." The Krobo say, "If there were no cases, there would be no proverbs about them." And the Ruanda, "A proverb comes not from nothing."

The Kongolese (Congo) say, "Proverbs are the affairs of the nation," and the Masai (Kenya/Tanzania) make it clear that "The bark of one tree will not adhere to another tree," meaning that one nation cannot assimilate the proverbs of another. The same proverb occurs in English ("The proverbs of a nation are the great books out of which it is easy to read its character"), in German ("As the country, so the proverb"), in Swiss-German ("A proverb characterizes nations, but must first dwell amongst them"), and in Scottish ("As the people, so the proverb"). All of these examples clearly show that each nation has its own special repertoire of proverbs.

That proverbs are the prerogatives of adults is indicated in a well-known Igbo proverb:

Those who cook okro soup have gone,
there remain those who only beat the (empty) plate.

This means that those (old men) who know proverbs are dead; we (younger generations) do not know many. Similarly, the Jarawa say:

A proverb is the language of the old people,
for they use it when they do not wish to be understood by others.

Both the Ruanda-Urundi and the Mende (the latter of Sierra Leone) believe that "Proverbs are the daughters of experience."

In two African proverbs we find recognition of the hidden and double meanings of proverbs. The Hausa say, "This is the beginning of words which are taken and jumbled up (that a man may not know their meaning), and these are called Habaichi (proverbs)," the Nandi of Kenya remark, "There is no saying without a double meaning."

The Fulani of Nigeria believe that proverbs always speak the truth: "A Fulani will lie, but not make a lying proverb." Close parallels are provided by the Basques ("Old sayings contain no lies"), the Estonians ("A proverb does not tell a lie; an empty pipe does not burn"), the Germans ("A proverb deceives not; the heavens fall not," or "A proverb never lies; it is only its meaning that deceives"), the Indians ("If there is falsity in a proverb, then milk can be sour"), the Russians ("Proverbs do not lie"), and the Spanish ("There are no proverbial sayings that are not true," or "Proverbs are little gospels"). Cervantes explains why proverbs tell no lies: "It seems to me, Sancho, that there is no proverb that is not true, for they are all opinions formed from the same experience, which is the mother of all knowledge."

According to a Kikuyu (Kenya) proverb, it is only the wise who can understand proverbs: "We speak by proverbs; he who is intelligent will understand them." The Yoruba version is: "The Ogidigbo (a type of drum used during a war) is the best of all drums; the Ogidigbo has a meaning in its sound; he who understands the sound can dance to it." The above is quoted to a person who uses many proverbs in his speech.

According to the Jarawa, "A proverb is the tongue of the wise, for the wise use it for wise talks," or "A proverb is the sharp knife of the wise person, for when a proverb is used, things are brought to a stop," or "Proverbs are good for those who are good proverb mongers only, for it is only they who know what they are saying." "They do not speak proverb and forget death" is an Igbo proverb, meaning that a wise child does not forget his father's last words. This is confirmed by another Igbo proverb: "A wise child is talked to in proverbs."

Another class of African proverbs shows us how fools react to proverbs. The Ashanti of Ghana, for instance, say, "When a fool is told a proverb, the meaning of it has to be explained to him." Similarly, the Igbo say, "When you speak in parable or proverb to a wise man he understands, but a fool never does." The Jarawa version is, "A proverb has no meaning to a fool, for when a proverb is used he does not understand it." Again, the Igbo, comparing the attitude of the wise to that of fools toward proverbs, say, "A wise person takes in a proverb spoken to him, but speak a proverb to a fool, and he flings his hands into the bush." Finally, the Birom believe that "A proverb is a solution to foolishness." We may again quote parallels from other nations:

- (i) The legs of the lame are not equal: so is a parable in the mouth of fools. (Bible)
- (ii) The wise make proverbs and fools repeat them. (English)

- (iii) Proverbs lie in the lips of fools. (English)
- (iv) Old saws--wise saws. (Estonian)
- (v) A proverb makes a thief wise. (Estonian)
- (vi) The wise man delights to seek out the mysterious meaning of proverbs. (Hebrew)
- (vii) Wise men make proverbs and fools repeat them. (Scottish)

The Ashanti believe that anyone may quote proverbs, but not every proverb which is uttered spreads. Thus, when a rich man utters a proverb, it spreads; but not so with the poor. They observe, "When a poor man makes a proverb it does not spread abroad." In a similar vein, the Germans say, "When a poor man makes a proverb, he does not break it."

We may conclude the list by citing an Hausa proverb which provides us with a piece of information about four Hausa cities and what they are noted for: "Kano for outward show, Sokoto for power, Zaria for bravery (and) Bauchi for proverbs."

NOTE

1. Most of the material for this collection comes from my students, who were asked to collect proverbs from their ethnic groups during the 1976-77 school session; these are their contributions to the Nigerian culture course taught at the University of Jos, Nigeria. Other material was obtained from African proverb collections.