

THE PROVERB AND THE WESTERN-EDUCATED AFRICAN: USE OR NEGLECT?

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The vastness of the African continent and its multiethnicity would discourage any attempt to make a study of the use of proverbs among Western-educated Africans in Africa. Such a study is, however, possible if Africans from different parts of the continent live in one geographical location. An example is the Africans studying at Indiana University in Bloomington, and the present study investigates this case. It is, however, limited to Africans south of the Sahara or Black Africans.

The concept of folklore as solely the purview of peasants has long been abandoned, as has the concept of folklore as "a lively fossil which refuses to die."¹ The association of folk with "the unsophisticated analytic mass,"² ... "peasant and rustic,"³ people not wholly independent of cities³ is also no longer valid. Folkloristics today looks not only at the lore of the agricultural population in the rural countryside, but also at the development of new folk traditions in the urban areas.⁴ Apart from this, the folklorist is now interested in the use of folklore material in geographic or social areas considered vulnerable to influences that are normally regarded as inimical to the preservation of traditional forms. In the United States and Europe the study of urban folklore is not new (McKlevie, 1968 and 1973; Bausinger, 1968; Dorson, 1971). In Africa, this field has little or no precedent. As Dorson says in his introduction to **African Folklore**, "No one has⁵ scratched the folklore in African cities."

If the use of folklore material among city dwellers is susceptible to influences, what about materials of folklore used by the subjects of formal education? This question becomes particularly relevant in Africa where formal Western education does not have a very long history.

The proverb is one art form whose use among Western-educated Africans merits assessment. By "use of proverb," I am referring specifically to verbal usage. This qualification is necessary because proverbs in Africa need not be orally expressed. They may be expressed on drums, through gestures, in dancing and through visual art or symbols.

There are reasons why a study of the use of proverbs attracts immediate attention. It is one form of expression to which the vast diversity of ethnic groups in Africa react similarly. Verbal wit is highly valued in Africa. Orators, preachers, litigants, debators, elders and participants in ordinary discourses normally consider it a mark of traditional sophistication to spice their speech with proverbs. This fact has been underlined by many scholars of African proverbs (Boadi, 1972; Arewa and Dundes, 1964; Andzrejewski, 1968). John Messenger, studying the use of proverbs among the Anang of Nigeria, observed how a plaintiff won judicial sympathy by employing a proverb in court.⁶ Unlike other verbal art forms like the riddle or the folktale, the proverb is employed in everyday discourse, and is probably the most spontaneous of all the expressive art forms in Africa. These factors make the proverb the most suitable candidate for a pioneering study, yet at the same time they make it the most difficult to examine, as far as usage is concerned.

It would be much easier to explore, for example, the relationship between written folklore materials and the Western-educated African writers. Writers like Camara Laye, James Ngugi, Chinua Achebe, Kofi Awoonor, Amos Tutuola and many others rely heavily on oral tradition in their English novels. Noting their intensive use of folklore materials in writing does not, however, lead to the conclusion that they would employ such materials in their everyday lives. The habitual user of proverbs in writing does not necessarily have verbal wit. Writing and speaking follow different traditions and require different skills. Oral use of the proverb is spontaneous, literary use is not.

The proverb researcher should avoid collecting data merely consisting of proverbs without regard to proverb competence. Children in Africa sometimes engage in a game of proverbs in which participants take turns in uttering proverbs. Elderly rural men, the usual targets of proverb scholars, may rattle one proverb after the other to the eager collector. But knowledge of proverbs is not necessarily equivalent to competence in proverb usage. Competition in proverbial wit begins with the selection of an appropriate proverb to fit a given situation. In the absence of a context, proverbial wit cannot be determined.

The Black African population on the Bloomington campus of Indiana University stands at an insignificant 160, measured against the total student population of nearly 42,000. The acquisition of Western education by Africans did not begin with their appearance in Bloomington. Educational systems based on Western models pervade the African continent. This was brought about by the Western scramble for Africa

in the 19th century. The colonial powers of Britain, France, and to some extent Spain, Portugal and Germany partitioned Africa and introduced Western concepts and values. Today, though Africa is largely independent, relics of Western influence are still evident.

The educational policies introduced by the colonial administration put particular emphasis on language. For example, the French colonial administration allowed only French to be used in schools and administration, while the use of indigenous languages was neglected and discouraged.⁸ In the British colonies, English instruction begins in the third year of primary school, and English is the language of instruction during the last two years of primary school. In secondary or high school, English is a compulsory subject of study, and it continues to be the medium of instruction. Entrance into the university has as a prerequisite a passing grade in English at the School Certificate Examination.

At the national level, the official/national languages of almost all the countries of Africa are non-indigenous, either English, French, or Spanish. There are some indigenous national languages, such as Swahili in Tanzania and Hausa in Northern Nigeria. But apart from these few areas, non-indigenous languages, Western languages, dominate the official language map of Africa. This does not mean that a majority of Africans are proficient in the use of French or English; only about 10% of Africa's population of over 150 million expresses itself well in either French or English.⁹ In general, people use indigenous languages. The situation presented above indicates, however, the dominant role of English or French in the linguistic habits of those who undergo

Western education, the result of which is an African scholar who is not at home with his indigenous language. Even when he is communicating to his peers in the local language, he laces his discourse with English or French expressions and vocabulary. If he is able to communicate solely in the indigenous tongue, his language lacks the proverbial or idiomatic finesse that characterizes the language of the non-Western-educated.

The proverb, unlike other verbal art forms, is part of everyday discourse in Africa. Investigating the use of the proverb one then faces a problem of methodology. The use of Goldstein's induced natural context technique which works for other genres¹⁰ would be of limited applicability here. The proverb is an exception to the method of induced natural context, because asking two informants to engage in a verbal exchange of proverbs is different from asking a group of people to gather and tell stories. In the latter case, there is a natural context (audience) which has been induced. In the case of the proverb there would be an audience or an induced context, but one essential ingredient of proverb usage would be lacking, namely linguistic context, an integral part of the definition of the proverb.¹¹ Furthermore, should the researcher here ask the informants to converse and use proverbs? If so, what topic of conversation should be raised? Obviously the use of proverbs cannot be predetermined. The user does not anticipate his use of proverbs; he cannot predict what topic or specific situation will inspire him to use a proverb. Proverbs are the result of an instant impulse, and a prolific user may speak continuously for several hours without using one proverb. What

could the researcher then conclude about the speakers' use of proverbs? Or is he going to ask his informants to compete in uttering proverbs out of linguistic context? If he were to adopt this approach, he would violate the meaning of popular sayings among several ethnic groups in Africa which advise the contrary. An Akan proverb says, "You cannot dream except in sleep," or sometimes, "Without discourse there is not proverb."

Having shown the fruitlessness of the induced natural context, there remain two alternatives for the scholar interested in proverb usage: observing the use of proverbs in a natural context, and interviewing subjects about their use of proverbs. The former technique is the most reliable, but its results may be haphazard owing to the nature of the proverb. The latter approach is probably more promising, the disadvantage being that informants find it difficult to recall a proverb they have used. In the research conducted by the present writer both methods were combined.¹²

We begin by examining a few proverbs which the present writer observed in the natural context:

- (1) A Ghanaian student meets a Tanzanian; the Tanzanian asks him how things are going. The Ghanaian says things are not going smoothly. His colleague expresses surprise knowing how self-confident the Ghanaian normally is. The Ghanaian replies by saying "The perspiration of the goat can hardly be noticed." The medium of expression here was English. The point in the above proverb is that outward appearances are deceptive, and that real suffering may go on beneath a facade of self-satisfaction. Here, the element of deception is symbolized by the goat's fur, and suffering is depicted by sweating.

(2) At a get-together organized by the African Studies Program, invited guests, consisting of Africans and Americans, are in a queue serving themselves from a table. There is a shortage of roast beef, yet some guests move on and select alternatives from a wide variety of food. One Nigerian, a Yoruba extremely anxious for the meat in spite of the alternatives provided, allows others in the queue behind him to pass while he waits for a replenishment of the stock of depleted roast beef. In a few minutes, the stock is replenished. The happy Nigerian in his excitement bursts out: "You see, the patient dog gets the choicest bone." His colleagues, both Africans and Americans, respond with laughter. Here, the user of the proverb places himself in the position of the dog whose supreme patience eventually pays off with the reward of its favorite delicacy: the bone.

(3) Two Ghanaians, A and B, both of whom speak the same language (Akan), speak of a respectable student, C, who has defrauded A. B advises A to confront C and challenge him. A is hesitant, because C's reputation makes a confrontation with him difficult. B insists that A should confront C, because "If your father-in-law does not feel abashed in asking you for money, you equally do not feel abashed telling him that there is none." This was originally expressed in Akan. B's message to A is that A should not feel constrained in paying back C in his own coin. In this proverb, the longstanding mutual respect between A and C is conveyed by the traditional mutual respect between a husband and his father-in-law. A respected man rarely defrauds his colleague, but neither does a father-in-law openly ask a son-in-law for money. In both cases, an unpleasant reaction is pardonable, according to B.

The three examples draw attention to a few important factors which contribute to determining the use of proverbs among African students on the Bloomington campus. In situations 1 and 2, the users were speaking to listeners with whom they do not

necessarily share a common indigenous African language. The discourses that inspired the use of the proverbs were in English. Here, we need to distinguish the proverb from the discourse which gave rise to it. The discourse did not necessarily demand the same effort from the proverb users whose mother tongue is not English. The rendition of the proverbs in English by the Africans required a special effort. The preceding discourse which gave rise to the proverb was also in English, but it required less effort. In the third situation, where the discourse took place in the mother tongue of the speakers, the utterance of the proverb was more smooth and spontaneous.

The use of a foreign language inhibits the use of proverbs. This is corroborated by responses to relevant questions put to subjects on the Bloomington campus. Most students mentioned the problem of language in answer the question of why they would use more proverbs at home than they would in Bloomington. Many people the students interact with do not speak the same mother tongue, in which the proverb could be more vividly expressed. This often calls for instant translation on the part of the proverb user--an exercise that can significantly reduce the aesthetic impact of the proverbs.

At this point, a skeptic may allude to the present case study as far-fetched and entirely unrealistic in a true African context, since in Africa the need for translation may not arise. Yet such an argument would play down the problem of language communication in Africa. The mere fact that most countries in Africa have a foreign language as the official language is a reminder of Africa's linguistic problems. Africa, with a population of less than 150 million, has at least 750 languages, and it is

sometimes as difficult to speak to someone from the same country as it is to communicate with someone from a different part of the continent. A few countries like Rwanda and Botswana are linguistically homogenous and offer no problem. But a country like Ghana, with 10 million people, has over 50 languages. Worse still, Cameroon with 4 million people has as many as one hundred languages.¹³ In communicating in Africa, then, the frequent use of the mother tongue by the Western-educated African cannot be asserted with any degree of certainty, even more so his use of proverbs. Basic to this is his relatively low proficiency in the indigenous language, brought about by the Western education he has undergone. The language problem is then not limited to the use of proverbs outside the African continent. It has to be admitted, however, that in terms of degree, the urge to use a proverb is greater when one is in Africa than when one is abroad. At home in Africa, the natural surroundings, animals, beliefs, attitudes, vegetation and other local phenomena and objects are constant reminders of the imagery in African proverbs and increase the urge to use a proverb. In addition, the use of proverbs by others, most often the non-Western-educated, could excite a feeling of guilt in the educated and urge him to attempt a proverb, preferably in his native tongue.

A proverb may be rendered inconsequential if the user has to explain it to the addressee. Consider the following situations:

- (4) An African student (an Ewe from Ghana) discusses with white American friends the invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union. His American friends accuse the USSR of interference in the internal affairs of

a sovereign nation. The African students draws their attention to America's involvement in Vietnam; the American students feel embarrassed by this. The African student then uses the following proverb: "When bones are mentioned in proverbs the old man feels uneasy." His colleagues do not seem to understand the proverb, possibly owing to the cultural difference. The African student then has to explain the the proverb. Bones of edible livestock are a common delicacy in Africa; they are hardly left untouched by diners during meals. The toothless old man is naturally not at home with bone owing to his dental handicaps. The mention of "bone," even when it is metaphorical, thus makes him uneasy. This proverb thus finds a suitable context in the uneasy feeling of the American students on the mention of Vietnam. The fact that the aesthetic impact of the proverb was lost on them is significant. In the American culture, bone in meat is normally not consumed. The aesthetic value of this proverb is felt only in a culture where the attitude to bone in a meal is the same or similar to the culture of the user of the bone proverb.

(5) Another African student calls his American friend several times on the phone. She is apparently not in. He tries again later and finds her in the room. To the question as to where she had been, she said she was in the bathroom. The African student is doubtful of the veracity of her claim, but gives up saying, "Where meat is divided with the teeth between two people, only God knows if equity has prevailed." The American girl apparently does not understand the image and the African student explains. The image here concerns someone dividing meat with his teeth and giving part to his colleague. The part given to the colleague is conspicuous to both of them. But it is not easy to say if the meat has been equitably divided. The size of the bite that remains in the mouth of the one responsible for the division remains unknown; who knows if he has given his colleague one-third and taken two-thirds? Similarly, one is not in a position to know if the girl is sin-

cere in her claims. The supremacy of God and His omniscience in the African belief system is simultaneously brought into focus here.¹⁴

The two examples show that a good and apt proverb may be rendered ineffective in the absence of spontaneous and immediate appreciation. Under such circumstances, the urge the use proverbs again diminishes; an active bearer of the proverb tradition may thus become a passive bearer in the absence of ready or instantaneous appreciation or understanding of his proverbs.¹⁵

It is, however, not always the case that proverbs are misunderstood when uttered in the presence of foreigners. Where the image of a proverb is simple and common enough, no problem of misunderstanding arises. The following proverb used by a Sudanese to a group of African and American students was explicit and required no further explanation:

(6) "Woman is like a shadow - when you chase it, it runs away; when you run away, it chases you."

Proverbs such as (6) are simple similes that lack cultural depth. They may be found in other cultures, and their use does not necessarily reflect verbal wit on the part of the speaker.

The urge to use a proverb increases where a proverb user is rewarded by spontaneous understanding or appreciation of his verbal wit. This is most possible where the proverb user communicates with an audience that understands his proverb.

(7) Two Tanzanian students, A and B, discuss the sharp economic contrast between rich and poor countries. They emphasize the need for more aid to developing countries. A says more surplus food should be sent to the poor countries by the rich countries. B agrees and says (the original proverb was in Swa-

hili): "In yesterday's sugar cane peel, the black ant has found a feast." In other words, waste food in one country may be a feast in another country. The two Tanzanians are very fond of using Swahili proverbs with each other, due to their mutual understanding for each other's proverbs and their shared attitudes. They find themselves on the same cultural and linguistic wave-length.

(8) Consider the following situation where a student from Nigeria uses a proverb in a meeting of the Nigerian Student Association. The students are unsettled by the long delays in the payment of student fees caused by the Nigerian government. The problem has now grown out of proportion, and the students are disturbed. One student at the meeting captures this situation in a proverb which he renders in Nigerian pidgin English: "Kpoho kpoho don turn to T.B." In standard English this proverb would be something close to: "It's gradual coughs that turn into tuberculosis." In other words, a simplistic problem may turn into a difficult one if not solved. The use of this proverb evoked spontaneous laughter in the meeting, and in the next edition of the Nigerian Student Association Newsletter a cartoon using this proverb appeared.¹⁶ The cartoon meant to capture the plight of the students, and the funny proverb used at the meeting had to be echoed to put the point across. The words **kpoho kpoho** in the proverb are ideophones conveying the sound of coughing. A non-African at the meeting would not have felt the aesthetic impact of this proverb. The proverb also marks a significant novelty which could be an index to a new form of proverb in the urban areas of Africa. Pidginized proverbs seem to be catching on, particularly in Nigeria where pidgin English is very much in use; "...oral folklore simply moves into new forms," says Dorson.¹⁷ The above proverb affirms this assertion.

The use of proverbs among the Western-educated Africans can generally be said to be limited. The more important point, how-

ever, seems to be that the educated African is aware that this is a handicap. He is aware of the aesthetic value of the proverb, but several factors hinder his acquisition of the skill of verbal wit. He is aware that proverbs "are the repository of wisdom," as informants said, or "are used to strengthen arguments," "help (me) start a point or argument," "are a store-house of traditional philosophy," "help (me) summarize a point." He admires the proverbial prolixity of the non-Western-educated, yet he cannot satisfactorily achieve this himself. Where he has used a proverb, it has more often been one that lacks symbolic depth, and it has been uttered without confidence.

Having noted the generally low key on which the proverb is used among the Western-educated Africans, it has to be admitted that there are a few African students whose use of the proverb is remarkable, and this is enthusiastically acknowledged by their peers. Further research into the socio-cultural background of these skilled users of the proverb revealed that these had had direct and continuous contact with folk traditions. Said one of my informants who seemed to be adept in the use of proverbs: "My father was a good user of proverbs." Another informant revealed that his father is the oldest man in the village, and it is in his house that all important discussions pertaining to the village take place. Another good user of the proverb told me that he grew up with his grandmother in a village and that she spoke mainly in proverbs. Ghanaian students who use proverbs very frequently had similar stories. They were brought up in rural surroundings; one of them lived in a chief's palace, and the father of another is the chief's linguist.

Rural upbringing and early and continuous exposure to the proverb tradition are largely responsible for the fondness of proverbs among a few of the Western-educated Africans.

In the absence of continuous contact with tradition the Western-educated African becomes more susceptible to the domination of his linguistic attitudes by Western tradition. He finds himself ill-equipped to respond to proverbial greetings if he is, for instance, a Luganda from Uganda. If he is an Akan from Ghana, he fumbles if he has been called upon to act as a spokesman for his father in traditional meetings. And if he is a Yoruba, he has a deep sense of guilt when the elders caution him as follows: "Words are like drums, only the well-versed can beat it; only the knowledgeable can dance to it."

NOTES

1. See Potter's definition of folklore in Marian Leach (1950).
2. See definition two of folk in A. Hultkrantz (1960).
3. A. Hultkrantz, *op. cit.*
4. R. Dorson (1976) discusses folklore in the modern world thoroughly, see pp.33-73.
5. Dorson (1971), p. 65.
6. See J. Messenger (1965).
7. See Yankah (1976), p. 129.
8. See Pierre Alexandre (1972), pp. 77-84.
9. Pierre Alexandre, *op. cit.*
10. See Kenneth Goldstein (1964), chapter VI.
11. See Yankah (1977).

12. Arewa and Dundes in their widely-quoted "Proverbs and the Ethnography of Speaking Folklore" do not indicate the method they used in getting the context of the proverbs they discuss.
13. See Pierre Alexandre, op. cit.
14. See K.A. Opoku (1978), p. 14-29.
15. This finds a close parallel in von Sydow's assertion that "an active teller of tales will become a passive bearer...when nobody cares to listen to him any longer." See von Sydow (1948), p. 15.
16. See Nigerian Students Association Newsletter, v. 2, no. 2, p. 2.
17. Dorson (1972), p. 30.

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