

The strength of crocodile is the water (Tsonga proverb)

Chieftom does not cross the river (Tsonga proverb)

Representation of power through Oral literature:

The Tsonga proverbs

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Background

Interest on Oral literature, and particularly in proverbs, dates back to ancient times. The works of Aristotle and Plato on literature and rhetoric are examples (Kindstrand: 1978). The Holy Bible is another example of the use and valorisation of these short and deep texts. However, the systematic study of the subject is relatively recent. The development of subjects like Social Anthropology, Linguistics, particularly on Semantics, Semiotics and Pragmatics, and Literary studies have given a crucial contribution in a new vision on the subject.

During the Romantic period in Europe, a particular attention was paid on Oral Literature. There was the belief that most European countries had lost their identity and originality (Grimm: 1893). The assumption was that all European cultures were influenced by the French culture, which was hegemonic culture after the Napoleonic invasions. This belief brought about a new perspective on oral literature. Particular attention was paid to these *corpus* put in a second plan for a long period of time. The aim was to recover the “original” and “pure” thought process of the different peoples of Europe (Silva: 1988). In this perspective, oral texts were assumed to be fossilised forms from the past, having not changed since their creation. Consequently it was thought that a return to the oral culture could witness the revival of “pure and genuine cultures”. This, in a way, was an admission that the written literature had lost the capacity of producing or creating new and authentic materials that could identify specifically individual groups and cultures.

The Romantic period should be pointed out as a great moment for oral literature studies. During the period a big step was made to elevate oral literature from “darkness” to a new status focusing on collections and systematic analysis of oral forms of culture. Thus the Grimm brothers in the 19th century Germany developed a huge movement in defence of oral literature, which they called *Vosksgeit*, *Popular Antiquities*, *Naturepoesie* (natural poetry) as opposed to “artificial poetry”, the written

literature. William Thoms in England created the term “folklore”, while the French scholar Paul Sébilot, used the term “oral literature”. Other scholar including Teófilo Braga, in Portugal, referred it as “popular literature”, while Menendez Pidal in Spain preferred the term “traditional literature”. Clearly, this profusion of terminologies to refer this ensemble of texts is a reflexion of a new interest in oral literature in social studies.

In Africa, after the Berlin Conference, the colonial powers were under pressure to legitimize their claims of power over their African territories in accordance with the Berlin Act and the principle of “effective occupation”. Consequently it became important to each colonial power to know the land and the people which it had to deal with. This gave rise to a new movement in anthropological field studies which included the massive collection and analysis of oral literature. These collections and studies were made by ethnologists and missionaries in order to “discover the African soul” or the real African cultural identity. The motivation was not different from the European movement: discover the identity was the focus. However, two points distinguish these approaches. The first was an interest in their own identity, and the second was on others, the Africans, as a mean of facilitating Christian Evangelization and the administration of the colonies. This entailed research into the traditions of the people. The European one was directed to the internal community and in Africa it was directed to the external community. Research was centred on how to get local (African) information to the Europeans. This is shown by the fact that all collections were bilingual – all texts were translated from African to the European languages. It is significant to note that apart from the Holy Bible, no other translations from European texts to African Languages were made.

Later, in the 20th century, and with rise of African nationalism, Africans themselves started to collect and study oral literature in order to recover their “lost” identity. The philosophy of this movement was based on reaction against colonial practices of imposing new cultures, and the marginalisation of the indigenous cultures. This movement had its roots in the Negritude school, led by A. Césaire from Martinique and L. Senghor from Senegal. The ideal of this movement is *“la conscience d’être noir, simple reconnaissance d’un fait qui implique acceptation, prise en charge de son destin de noir, de son histoire, de sa culture; elle est affirmation d’une identité, d’une*

solidarité, d'une fidélité à un ensemble de valeurs noirs"¹. This philosophy played an important role in the development of African nationalism. As an intellectual movement it impelled the large-scale collection and analysis of folklore and oral literature.

The first International Congress on Oral Literature was held in Paris in 1889. A hundred years later, 1989, and again in Paris, UNESCO recommended that particular attention be paid to oral literature as a patrimony of the **Humanity (human kind)**. Today, oral literature has gained its own space and status as an academic subject studied all over the world, in different universities and institutions. The most interesting aspect of this is that the subject is taken in an interdisciplinary as well as transdisciplinary view.

Proverbs which are the particular interest in this paper are now legitimate subject of academic study and we have a subject called Paremiology whose central interest is proverbs. Great studies had been done in this field. Archer Taylor (1890-1973) published *The Proverb* (1962) among other valuable contributions, focusing on the origin and historical accidents of transmission and preservation, the content and the style of these peculiar texts. Maati Kuuzi (1914-1998) published *Towards an International Type-System of Proverbs* (1972); Permiakov (1919-1983), the Soviet Linguist and Folklorist, published his now classic study on proverbs *From Proverb to Folk-Tale* (1979); Alan Dundes published "On the Structure of the Proverb" (1975). More recently, Wolfgang Meider several studies on proverbs among them we call attention to *Wise Words: Essays on the Proverbs* (1994); and S. Arora published "The Perception Of Proverbiality" (1995). Among other publications, these belong to the foundation of modern Paremiology.

The rationale of the study

Proverbs are institutions, and they are used everyday and everywhere by anyone, in different ways. It is rewarding to examine how proverbs represent power in its structure and content as text and its relation in the society.

This paper will discuss how proverbs represent power in different dimensions. Firstly, the presented diachronic view shows clearly on one hand the change of status of the oral literature, in general, and proverbs, in particular. This achievement, the change

¹ ... create the conscience and pride of being negro, simple recognition of a fact that implies acceptance, connected of his condition of black (negro), his history, his culture; it is the affirmation of a identity, of a solidarity to an assemble of black values. (Cesaire: 1939) (The translation is mine)

of status, represents recognition not only by the community of users but also by institutions of knowledge like universities among others.

Secondly, in the community proverbs are used to represent power. They seem to be accepted as texts of authority and legitimacy. The users of these texts believe that they are unchangeable truths which must be accepted and respected by the community. The formula used to announce them constitute authority to establish some social order where and when they are used. They seem to be an argument that cannot be challenged, conferring to the performer the moral authority or legitimacy to remark his or her point of view and impose obedience to who is confronted by the text. Normally, the proverb is announced by a formula like: "... as old people say..."; "...as it is true..."; "it's true that ..."; "We the Tsongas (Makuas, or Shonas...) know that ..."etc. The formula that introduces the proverb is connected to the user and the manner the message is presented, and received. This is what confers power supported by the idea of something from the past, from generation to generation, without change, without discussion. This is an argument used to promote education and continuity of values and to maintain a particular social order. This means that these texts hold very particular functions in the communities.

Thirdly, text - the structure and the content of proverbs - defines some kind of knowledge represented by symbols that describe unchangeable facts. Concepts like power, defined by physical force, moral or political authority, legitimacy, territorial integrity, and influence of seduction, among others are presented on different dimensions and symbolised by material forces like animals, plants or objects which are framed on encyclopaedic or cultural knowledge, mystified or not. Describing their behaviour, nature or utilities of the objects the proverb submit the idea of truth and systemic observation of the Nature and the society through implicit or explicit analogies.

How are these two social aspects related?

What is a proverb?

The problem of defining a proverb seems to be as old as has been the interest in them. Several definitions of proverb exist, and it is noteworthy to observe that, to a great extent these definitions are focused on both its structure and its meaning. People

who consciously used them or began to collect them needed to differentiate proverbs from other gnomic devices such as maxims, apothegms, aphorisms, etc. (Manjate:2000)

Proverbs are short texts that stabilise profound implicit and explicit analogies. They are figurative or metaphorical in nature. Accordingly to Finnegan “proverbs are sayings in more or less fixed form marked by shortness, sense, and salt and distinguished by popular acceptance of truth tersely expressed in it (...)” (Finnegan: 1977); For A. Jolles (1969) says “ ... proverbs are brief sentences which concludes an experience.”

Incidentally, earlier definition of proverb, coming from Taylor (1952) seems to be more opened and more flexible, opening up the possibilities for the creation of other proverbs through the old and crystallised structures: “...An incommunicable quality tells us this sentence is proverbial and that one is not. (...) Let us be content with recognising that a proverb is a saying current among the folk.” This point of view is, in fact, more flexible, taking in to account that proverbs can be invented in several ways. This perspective has been supported by later by Drewal (1992) and Yankah (2000). Taking in account to the nature of the oral activity, the dynamism of societies and cultures, it is more “democratic” to accept changes and new possibilities of creation in the corpus of proverbs or any other oral texts.

Etymologically, proverb is a Latin word which means truth, or an everlasting message of wisdom. This suggests that the message brought by a proverb is true anytime, anywhere, and for everybody. The use of the present tense and the indicative mood makes them texts that describe permanent states (conditions), connecting past, present and future². The value of a proverb does not lie only in what it reveals in a literal reading or the thought of the past. For the poets and speakers using an artistic style of presentation, proverbs are powerful and deep thought in an original way.

The introductory formula for proverbs – as “the ancient use to say” or “as the truth used to be” ... - make them texts of authority. No one can break the authority of the old knowledge, of the ancient. It means that throughout the time, people had observed, thought, and had created and formulated a statement that cannot be challenged. Only another proverb– because it had gone trough the same process - can “challenge” the authority of a proverb. This is the philosophy and the point of view defended largely by the folklorists from the Romanticism period and by some from the modern ages, that

² Without overlooking this aspect we propose to discuss it in other occasion.

consider oral literature in a static perspective. Recent studies have however challenged this point of view.

A proverb is a model of compressed and forceful language, drawing at the same time frames of wisdom, linguistic and cultural competences. Politicians, priests and advertisers of a variety of products know well how to explore proverbial models to strength their messages and influence audiences.

However, there are other words that refer to these short and peculiar texts, in most of the cases metaphorical, and deep texts.

- *Gnomo*, from Greek meaning knowledge;
- *Paremia*, from Latin, meaning learning/teaching, enhancing its pedagogical and didactical tendency; hence Paremiology, the designation of the new subject (science) that studies *gnomos* or proverbs;
- *Seibayat*, from Egyptian, means teaching, enhancing its pedagogical and didactical structure and use; this word is connected with Sabbaticals, what links with *knowledge*.
- *Vuthary*, from Tsonga (an ethnic group in Mozambique and South Africa), means knowledge, intelligence and weapon. Metaphorically weapon means power that can destroy the enemy as such as the intelligence can destroy the enemy or the opposing people ;
- *Msibe or Msive*, from Makua (an ethnic group in Mozambique,) that means knowledge.
- *Tsumo and zwirero*, from Shona that means metaphor and knowledge, respectively.

The conclusion to draw here is that in all cases proverb refers to knowledge and teaching/learning process. The content, structure, and use of the proverbs are connected to deep messages fulfilling some functions in the communities.

Among the Tsonga, there are common ways to refer these texts. For example, words like *word* (I have a *word* ... or this *word* of the ancients or I've learned from this *word*) or *voice* (This voice says ...) can refer to these texts metaphorically. These words give authority to the oral voice. The word and the voice are important to these communities where the scripture is not part of the tradition. The oral word and the voice

are respected and valorised. They materialise the authority as linguistic and cultural competence and as a force that can change things or impose order.

Proverbs, short and concise, are texts of authority for two reasons. Firstly, they summarise observation accumulated over centuries of experience. Secondly, because their use and understanding are based on cultural knowledge about the symbols and on the authority converted in the capacity and sense of propriety in use of a proverb. That is why in Africa, proverbs are regarded as a major genre. In some cultures, women and children cannot use this kind of texts. Among the Makuas, in Mozambique, for example, only initiated boys may use proverbs. That is why there is a belief that the content of these texts are unchangeable truths and constitute didactical message. The content and the traditional users confer to them power and authority. The formula that normally pre-announces a proverb as "...it's truth that ..." reinforce this character of legitimacy and authority claimed by the performers and their close audiences.

2. Some paradigms in the study of proverbs

Until recently, scholars were more interested in lexicographic, stylistic, structural, functional and comparative studies. However, Russian scholars like Roman Jakobson, Vladimir Prop, Peter Bagatyrev and Permjakov have introduced in somewhat different line of thought and perspective of studying texts, and proverbs, in particular. They introduced a formal and a structural method in literature and this has opened the way for important perspectives in analysing simple forms. This perspective emphasizes two aspects: the text (language and structure) and its function in the society. These two terms – structure and function – focus on the semiotic study of proverbs. Thus, the proverb is taken as a particular kind of text to which a particular function is ascribed certain attributes within a given culture.

While these contributions represent a major advance in the definition, language, structure and meaning of proverbs, they fail for the most part to consider two very important aspects that go beyond purely linguistic aspects of proverbial texts. The one deals with the diachronic aspect of traditionality, i.e., the fact that any text to qualify as a proverb must have some currency for a period of time. The others sacrifices or neglects the actualisation or the changes that each performance in connection with cultural and social changes can affect the structure, the language or even the content. Synchronic aspects are affected by the old vision promoted by the first folklorists who defended the immutable form of the texts.

The essential about the proverb is its meaning. However the deep meaning of the proverb is made clear only when, side by side with the “translation”, is given a full account of the accompanying social situation, the reason of its effect, and its significance in speech, i.e., *the context*. Only the context – how, when, where, by who, in which situation it is used, etc. - can give us the deep significance of the message.

With the context arises another very important factor: the performance. In oral tradition this is the only way the text can become alive; it is when the text is actualised and (maybe) recreated according to the moment and all complex communicative acts and other factors. The description of a proverb meaning, as was stated above, is not possible without reference to contextual factors.

Another important aspect to be added to the above-mentioned factors (text and function) is the context. There is no link between the text (language and structure) and the function without the context.

The structure of texts defines them as belonging to a particular sphere or genre. They are different from tales or short stories, riddles and songs. Knowing this, the interlocutors receive the texts, hearing and reacting in different ways. The connection between the texts (structure and function) is learned through a long and complex process of socialisation. Through this process community members understand that proverbs and tales fulfil different functions in the society and demand different attitudes towards them. In tales or short stories there is action and all understanding must come through the relation among the characters, which in most cases are symbolised by animals or special beings. It is important to understand the end of the stories to receive the full message.

Performance as paradigm of the study of the proverb

Oral literature by definition depends on a performer who formulates words on specific occasions – there is no other way it can be realised as a literary product. “Without its oral realisation and direct rendition by a singer or speaker, an unwritten literary piece cannot easily be said to have any continued or independent existence at all.”(Finnegan: 1977)

Written and taped oral texts are only pale registration of what they really are. They are a good memory support but truly they don’t give a full image of the oral texts. They can’t register the complex dynamism that represents the verbal art: the performer,

the audience, the voice, the gesture, the context and the occasion in which the text was performed. All these elements are active part of what we call oral literature.

Stylistics, structural and semiotic studies are important landmarks in the contextual study of proverbs. However they do not focus on the performance. In addition, it is very important to underline the performance, because in all those studies it is significant that the proverb is taken as a fixed and immutable form. This point of view does not allow approaching the proverb from a dynamic perspective; it does not allow discussing productivity and creativity in a proverbial context. A study of the dynamics of proverb use would involve the documentation of situational contexts. The significance of performance in oral literature goes beyond a mere matter of definition, for the nature of the performance itself can make an important contribution to the impact of the particular literary form being exhibited. Transformational or generative process defended by Chomsky (1967) is embedded in African performance practised through acts of re-presentation, or repetition with critical differences. This vision is contrary to the idea that performances of oral texts are rigid, stereotypic, conservative and invariant.

The perception of the proverb as a quotation seems logical, because the community knows them and recognizes them, but these attitudes by the community toward the proverbs or any other kind of texts do not exclude the possibility of creativity. Performance necessarily involves relationship between the past and the individual agent, his interpretation of the past in a specific occasion in the present. Knowing the structure, language, the symbols involved, and overall the message to pass any native member of a given community can use his linguistic and cultural competence to create a forceful message. This competence associated with the transformational process can create proverbiality, i.e, the quality required to engage the audience in such environment of acceptance and recognition of the text as their own creation and as representative of their Cosmo vision (cosmic vision).

Using performance as a paradigm underlines a dialectical relation with culture as a social process and recovers the theoretical approach of the intertextuality defended by Kristeva and M. Bakhtin (1977).

As far as proverbs from past generations are concerned, questions as to their true proverbiality can be, and have been, ascertained by historical dictionaries that put together references and variants for particular proverbs from written sources. Paremiographers around the world have put together interesting collections, printed and

reprinted, giving us the idea of unchangeable forms. But it is very important to connect them with the social and historical contexts and put questions that can bring the reflection to a synchronic point of view, i.e. how they are used in a certain time and space. In addition, field works must be seen as the crucial base to study the actual forms of proverbs or the proverbiality in connection with the linguistic and cultural competences.

The following proverbs have some similarities and differences as well.

1. A tikuzi timbiri ta tivuvu a ti tsami tiba gin'we.

Two male hippos do not stay in the same pond.

2. Tinghala timbiri a ti tsami mbanghu hin'we.

Two lions don't stay in the same space.

3. Tihomu timbiri a ti tsami etshangeni rin'we.

Two bulls cannot stay in the same kraal.

4. Tixinzi timbiri a ti tshami ncele wun'we.

Two squirrels do not remain in one hole.

5. Ti kuku timbiri a ti tshami mbangu wun'we.

Two cocks cannot stay in the same pen.

6. Ndlopfu a yi fi hi rimbabwe rin'we.

An elephant doe not die of one (broken) rib.

7. A big tree does not die of one (broken) brunch.

(A baobab tree does not die of one (broken) brunch.

8. Nghala yi vomba exihlahleni.

A lion roars in the bush.

.... I mati

9. Tinghala timbiri ta chavana (tchavana).

Two lions fear each other.

10. Tinghala timbiri ti tchavana hi mabvele.

Two lions respect each other's name.

11. Nyoka i famba hi marhumbo.

The snake moves on its belly.

12. A xitimela i famba hi makhala.

A train moves by charcoal.

The variants above (compare 1/2/3/4/5 and 9/10; 6/7; 11/12) show well the possibilities of creativity. The structure is the same and the symbols involved bring up common cultural values like: strength, power, authority, legitimacy, but the texts are different. The changes in the texts have not changed the essential message or the significance of the proverbs. Any speaker with cultural and linguistic competence can create a valid and acceptable proverb or at least a structured text according to the cultural framework and this can easily be included in the *corpus*.

There are other variant possibilities that may refer to the same proverb. The use of the interrogative form is very common to refer certain value through references to proverbs or proverbial symbols.

Among the Tsonga people of Mozambique is very frequent to use only part of a proverb (or just a reference) which is then completed by the interlocutors or audience. This is one creative way to use proverbs. Mentioning only a part of a proverb, the performer involves the audience, who participates, sharing and assuming at same time responsibility for that performance that may include opportunity and voice, underlining an agreement on the meaning to be brought out in that particular occasion. Other ways to announce or refer a proverb is to change the structure from the negative to the affirmative structure. Use of irony is also a common way to refer a given proverb.

Some illustrative cases

In a bus in Maputo, I heard this sentence “The cocks are going to seat at the same table” It’s clear that the speakers were referring to the known proverb, trying to underline some changes in the *truth* of the proverb “Two cocks cannot stay in the same pen.” Variants: two bulls cannot stay in the same herd. // Two hippos cannot stay in the same pond.

The conversation was about a meeting held by Chissano and Dlhakama, after the elections of 2000.

At Africa University, talking about Savimbi’s death some Angolan students commented: “... *now one of the cocks is dead, may be we’ll have some peace in the pen. Didn’t you know that two cocks cannot stay in the same pen?*” (Just for curiosity, the central symbol in the UNITA flag is a black cock).

In Mozambique one of the proverbs more commonly used is “O cabrito come onde está amarrado” (*The goat eats where it is tied.*)

This proverb which refers to corruption is used everywhere by anyone. It is very common in media. There are also new verbs in connection with the proverb: “cabritar” - meaning literally “to goat” (today in Mozambique means, “to steal” , “to mislead”). One frequently hear statements such as “Don’t you know that XXX is a goat?” or “XXX was caught goating ...” It’s quite sure that the proverb “Big goat, big grass; small goat, small grass” it’s a new one created from the first one.

These examples demonstrate the importance of performance in the study of proverbs, and underscore the dynamism and creativity of proverbs. A close study of proverbs on interactive situations helps to decipher and to assess the proverbs contextual propriety in the discourse, any modification or embellishment to which it has been subjected, and the particular shade of meaning conveyed by the embellishment.

Conclusion

In oral cultures it is quite difficult to think of a text as a fixed form, without any change happening throughout the centuries because the changes that occur in the texts ensure their survival in the community. They must adapt to the new generations and new situations; they must fit into new realities. Proverbs such as “The snake moves on its belly” and “The train moves by means of charcoal” obviously show some changes. In the past, trains were not common in the African culture. What remain are the values. With the crystallised forms and symbols – a way to confront abstract concepts – proverbs are metaphorical devices that can be created or produced, according to the community point of view. This can be done without the stigma of being a producer of “fakelore” (word created by Dorson in 1957/60 to refer pieces of oral literature performed with creativity). Dorson’s perspective impoverishes the vision and the practice of oral literature. It reduces the phenomenon to a static point of view. A dynamic point of view, which accepts changes – transformations on old texts and creation of new ones, seems to be more real and natural.

This reflection about proverbs brings up also reflections about mentalities, i.e, the values and the Cosmo vision of the community. Through the presented sample it’s possible to conclude that power is seen as unitary: two big and powerful begins cannot stay in the same place (kingdom or chiefdom). It’s strong: they do not die by a small controversy. It’s closed to itself: chiefdom cannot interfere in other places or territories

“do not cross the river”. There are values presented and defended along the centuries through generations. Thus, it’s valid to discuss, observing what surround us: are these the values still defended in our communities? Are these particular proverbs a reflection about what our communities think and do?

Recommendations

In an African and International institution like Africa University, it is very important to have subjects like Cultural and Social Anthropology, Oral Literature and Ethnology, and Ethnolinguistics or Ethnoliteratures in order to stimulate interest in the study of African cultural values.

It is strongly recommended that institutional researches must be done in different faculties and units, in a multidisciplinary perspective.

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