

Some Kuteb Aphorisms

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The Kuteb are one of the 24 ethnic groups that form the population of Gongola State of Nigeria. They inhabit the southern tip of that state where it borders Benue state (also in Nigeria) and the Cameroons. Their neighbours include, among others, the Chamba, Jukun and Ichen.

The exact population of the Kuteb people is difficult to know as they were not mentioned as a separate group in the Nigerian census conducted in 1963. The entire population of Gongola State itself is 2,605,163, and the six major ethnic groups—Mumuye, Fulani, Jukun, Chamba, Hausa and Bachama—total 1,082,567. So the Kuteb and the remaining 17 minority groups in the state account for 1,522,696.

The Kuteb are hill-dwellers, practising agriculture, as their main occupation. They also hunt animals. It is not surprising therefore that most of the proverbs in this paper allude to agricultural implements and products on the one hand and animals on the other hand. The main reason is that the proverb lore of a nation naturally reflects the material culture of that nation. Nyembezi (1974: 6) describes a similar position among the Zulu:

Zulus loved their cattle very much, and it is not surprising that the behaviour of cattle has found its way into the proverb lore of the Zulus. Of the domestic animals, it is the cattle which have given rise to most proverbs.

The Kuteb language belongs to the Niger-Congo family.

In addition to aphorisms, the people are rich in some genres of folklore, especially riddles, jokes and, of course, folktales. Curiously, however, my informant says:

Puns and tongue-twisters are not available in Kuteb society. At least those elders I interviewed expressed complete ignorance of them.

Again, according to my informant:

Children are forbidden to engage in riddles and jokes in the day time. Probably, this is to discourage indolence and loitering aimlessly about when they should be doing some profitable work elsewhere.

After a period of searching (consisting of Christmas and second-term holidays) we were able to collect only 28 proverbs. This number certainly is not all that the Kuteb possess. I now understand what other paroemiographers mean when they "doubt whether their collections are complete" (Finnegan 1976: 389). Indeed that is why Archer Taylor (1969: 367-71), a paroemiographical giant, asked: "How nearly complete are the collections of proverbs?"

The Kuteb, however, like the Bushmen of Southern Africa (Doke 1933: 6) and the Nuer², are not the only groups in Africa from whom a large number of proverbs have so far not been collected. On the other hand, the researches of Doke (1933: 6) show that the Southern Bantu have a large repertoire of

proverbs. The same is also true of the Congo and West Africa. (See e.g. Bascom 1964: 12-31; Bascom 1965: 483-484.)

We learn that some places outside Africa such as aboriginal America have little or no proverbs to offer collectors. Comparing Africa with aboriginal America, Greenway (1965: 162) says:

Africa again is the culture area where proverbs are most common and most important, and again aboriginal America has none or dubiously few.

So, as said already, the Kuteb are not the only people³ to provide a comparatively small number of proverbs. I intend, however, in future to continue my search for more Kuteb proverbs, hoping that the same elders who have been very helpful for the few herein collected are still alive! One is here reminded of the Igbo proverb which is a most important hint to proverb collectors. It is to the effect that:

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

Meaning: Those old men who knew proverbs are dead; we (young generations) do not know many.

Therefore collectors of proverbs should stop procrastinating which, we are told, is a thief of time, or as the Hausa say, we should spread tobacco while the sun shines.

This takes us logically to the reasons why paroemigraphers collect proverbs. I have had occasions (see e.g. Ojoade 1980: 91-96; and my articles, "One Hundred Ilaje Proverbs", forthcoming in the *Nigerian Field*; "Proverbs as a Mirror of Birom Life and Thought", in *Plateau Perspectives*, edited by Professor Elizabeth Isichei and to be published by Macmillan Press) to state some reasons for collecting African proverbs in general and Nigerian proverbs in particular; more than that I have also listed the reasons of other paroemiographers (which are on all fours with mine) for deciding to collect proverbs. (See my article "Jarawa Proverbs" forthcoming in the *Nigerian Field*.)

Here, however, it suffices to say that for any person—be he a historian of manners, psychologist, anthropologist, folklorist or linguist—to be able to have an insight into the character and thoughts of a people or to study their language, nothing gives him greater data than the people's folklore, idioms, maxims, famous and sententious sayings.

My method is to first make an alphabetical list of Kuteb proverbs in the original text, then give their free translations and finally explicate their meanings by describing the cultural as well as the social contexts in which they appear.⁴ It will be noticed that, for certain proverbs, I have cited several similar examples from other nations (see for example Ojoade 1978/79: 13-18), especially African ones, as I had done elsewhere. I have given myself this latitude because I cannot resist the temptation to bring in obvious parallels culled from my reading of other collections—for I am constantly reminded of them as I am sure my readers also will be from their own experience.⁵

Another straw added to this introduction may break the camel's back! So now to the proverbs.

1. Achir si nde ta kum ajwo.

Yams produce large tubers in the farm of the leper.

With what will he harvest them? It is like a toothless farmer harvesting plenty of maize. Morally the proverb is used to describe an undeserving inheritance or gift to a person who is incapable of utilizing it.

- Cf. "Gold should be sold to one who knows its value" (Yoruba)

"Do not cast pearls before swine" (Matthew vii, 6)

"Anulus aureus in naribus suis" (Latin)

To put a ring of gold in a swine's snout.

"Put not meat into a chamber-pot", a saying attributed to Pythagoras.

- Cf. Nos. 4 and 21.

2. A kiking ajwo kpan yi atso be.

Fingers are not all equal.

A person who complains that he has not achieved the same amount of success as his former school-mates will be quickly consoled by the citation of this proverb, implying that nature herself creates inequality.

3. Anying ti azaen, a tub tak ba yi ru ise be.

It is impossible to spit out all the blood from a cut in the tongue.

No matter how repugnant a child's behaviour is, for example, to his father he cannot disown him completely, because the child is his own blood relation.

To the Kuteb, as to many other Africans, a child is a precious possession. Hence a parent cannot completely disown this god-given present. There is a saying among the Yoruba to the effect that "if you beat your child with the right hand you draw him to yourself with the left".

4. Aswu si nde ta mbub anyi.

Peanuts grow extraordinarily well in the farm of a toothless man.

This has the same meaning and application as Nos. 1 and 21.

5. Atem jim rina wae.

Sighing relieves anger.

According to my informant:

"When a man has been offended by another and he is threatening to fight, the elders present will tell him to keep his peace. If he cools down he may sigh after some time. When this happens the elders will then say since he has sighed, no one should provoke him again because that sighing has relieved his anger."

6. Aten pyir ayib ki si rikwae.

Tears refuse to flow down the eyes but down the neck.

My informant comments:

"When a pathetic situation arises an elderly man may be moved to the point of shedding tears. But since he should not weep openly as children or women do, it is said that his tears flow down the neck instead of the eyes as is expected.

He is actually experiencing the agony of the situation and is in a weeping mood, but courage restrains tears from flowing down his eyes."

This must be compared with the Yoruba proverb, when an old man sweats while speaking he is not sweating but he is actually weeping.

7. Awu nja abying si pu ribong.

He has excreted in his pond.

A person who wilfully repays the kindness of one on whom he depends with wickedness, will certainly hesitate to approach that person for future assistance. The elders will say he has committed a suicidal act by excreting in his own drinking-pond.

8. A ye ta kub aswu ngwau ambyi be?

He who eats nuts must drink water.

The proverb is used to caution people who look for trouble because once that trouble comes they must face the consequences.

Cf. "Le vin est verse; il faut le boire." (French)

The Bengal version is:

"When the cork is drawn, the wine must be drunk."

9. Ife ki jwo rici, rici ki jwo ife.

The left washes the right as the right washes the left.

This is a universal proverb:

Cheir cheira knexei (Greek)

Manus manum lavat (Latin)

Or

Manus fricat manum (Latin)

Una man lava Patra, et tutte due lavano il viso (Italian)

One hand will not wash the other for nothing (Scottish)

One of his hands is unwilling to wash other for nothing (English)

Eine hand waescht die andere, aber das Gesicht waescht man mit beyden Haende (German)

The right hand helps the left and the left the right (Tamil)

Gauche lave droite, droite lave gauche (French-speaking Baule)

Nano lota nyamo nyamo bo lota nano (Fulani)

Ọtun wẹ osi, osi wẹ ọtun, ni ọwọ mejeji fi nmọ (Yoruba)

The message of the proverb is that reciprocal assistance is part of man's existence.

10. Iken ta nde iyib si ken ta nde riwen.

What happens to the eyes must also affect the nose.

When a member of a family bound by a common cause is harmed, the others also are naturally affected. The Hausa say:

"If anything touches the nose the eye waters."

Cf. The Kikuyu saying:

"One hates to see the blood of a thing that belongs to him."

Or

"If Komu has it, Kaigu, his brother, has it too" (Kikuyu)

Or

"The watering eye makes the nose water" (Idoma)

Or

"When the eye weeps, the nose does not rest" (Kru)

Or

"If the eye weeps, the nose does not rest" (Jabo)

11. Inji a nung u mbyiu nung be, umen u sang itu be.
If the elephant is not aware of the size of its anus, it will not swallow the palm-fruit.

The proverb implies that the elephant trusts that its anus is large enough for the fruit to pass through later. The proverb can be applied to a person who knowing the consequences of an action, still deliberately takes the seemingly dangerous step.

Cf. He who swallows the new marula nut has a large anus (Ndebele)

Or

He who swallows the fresh marula nuts, is the one who has a big hole in his rectum (Amandebele)

Or

He who swallows fruit-stones trusts his throat (Sironga)

Rattlesnake says: "Before you swallow a lo nut you must have faith in your rectum" (Kru)

We do not stop a girl from opening up her vagina as long as she has pubic hair to cover it (Ilaje, Yoruba)

Cf. No. 12

12. Inji nung mbyiu nung tawe umen uwaen kitu.
The elephant was aware of the size of its anus before it swallowed the calabash.

This has the same meaning as well as the same application with No. 11.

13. Jim utob namae utswo ifin.

Be as patient as testis.

Says my informant:

"People who easily flare up at slight provocations are usually encouraged to exercise patience and restraint. They are told to be as patient as testis which is always there only as an observer when penis goes in to enjoy the cool moisture of the vagina."

To Kuteb people the testis demonstrates the greatest example of patience that should be emulated.

14. Kakum ta kum kin, Rimam ta wra king wu.

The horse that has no tail, it is God who drives away flies from its anus.
A cold comfort for the poor!

This means that the poor or helpless man relies on God for assistance. But the Fulani say:

"God will not drive away flies for a tail-less cow."

Which means that God helps those who help themselves.

15. Kakum ta si te afkyen inje ma ki zwun si upu.

Even a four-legged horse stumbles and falls.

The proverb is said of a person who, in spite of his intelligence, still makes mistakes. In fact the proverb is always cited to deny man's infallibility.

Cf. "The ox falls in spite of its four legs" (Mandi)

"A horse has four legs, yet it often falls" (Tiv.)

"A horse has four legs but it often falls" (Jukun)

"Slipping has no hero" (Kikuyu)

Or

- “A quiver upside down cannot fail to pour out its arrows” (Kikuyu)
 16. Kisung ya aswu ta ba pu kitkya afob yi.

The hare leaves the nuts only to fall on a trap (because of) the shells.
 The hare leaves the real nuts to fall for the shells.

A person who throws away what was in his hand for the one outside his grasp which eventually he cannot get is ridiculed by the citation of this proverb. In other words, to quote a Swahili proverb, such a person “has thrown away his brass for the glitter of gold” or to quote a Nandi saying, “he has thrown away the figs which grow at the bottom of the tree and hastened to pick those which grow at the top”. He does not know that ‘a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush’.

17. Kitkyin ndadab ba natsan atswo ifen.

An erect penis must come to rest on the testicles.

The following is the explanation which my informant gives:

Children must return to their parents no matter how angry they are with them. This is because the parents are their source of survival.

Thus whatever the magnitude of their anger they must still cool down because they depend upon their parents just as the penis depends upon the testicles as a resting place.

18. Mba ukan rikpe be.

The translation, according to my informant, is not easy to give. But it means that the child “keeps” or “takes” the footsteps of his father’s.

That is, he does not deviate from the norms established by his ancestors.

The Greeks would say:

“Ex agathōn agathon.” (“From good parents comes a good son”)

Or

“Petra apokomm ateramnō.” (“A chip of the old flint”)

The Latin version is:

“Qualis pater, talis filius.”

African versions include:

“The hare keeps to the path that the old hare made” (Zulu)

“The shoot grows from the old stock” (Zulu)

“The calf of the wild buck leaps where the mother has leapt” (Zulu)

“The small pot is like the large one” (Ndebele)

“A fox does not get a timid child” (Kikuyu)

“Old people’s walking teaches young ones to walk” (Kikuyu)

“The leaf that the big goat has eaten its kids eat also” (Igbo)

“The chameleon has produced its child; (now) the child is expected to know how to dance” (Yoruba)

Cf. The English:

“Like father like son”

Or

“What is bred in the bone will never come out of the flesh”

Or

“A chip off the old block”

The proverb is used to describe a child who behaves, or does something whether well or badly, exactly as his father used to behave or do.

19. Mbae ta ki fkyen wu "yata yata" be, uba fkyen "suk".

The child who cannot listen to "stop it, stop it", will definitely listen to "it serves you right".

A person who refuses to listen to warnings of danger sees the danger only when blood flows.

The Sironga version is:

"They refuse to be told: a man sees by the dropping of blood."

The lesson is summed up in the Latin saying:

Experientia docet.

20. Mbakun ki cheb wuen u mbae wu be.

The stepping of a hen on its chicks does not cause their death.

Whenever a mother beats her child, especially to correct him, this proverb can be quoted by someone else or even by the mother herself to imply that the beating cannot cause serious bodily harm to the child.

The proverb conjures an image characteristic of African villages: when the hen has produced many chicks it steps very carefully in order to avoid stepping on any of them. Yet as should be expected some of these chicks still suddenly come in her way. At this juncture you may see the hen stepping on one or two of them. But the Kuteb see that action as a mistake the impact of which is very light because as a Fulani proverb says, the "hen does not tread on its young through hate".

21. Nde ti iyang (ugbo) cha ukam Kitkyin.

The indolent unfortunately grows a large penis.

That is, he can produce more children than he can provide for. The meaning of the proverb is the same as Nos. 1 and 4.

22. Rimun zwug waen ukir.

The wild yam kills the real yam.

Or

Water yam kills the good yam.

In the Kuteb society, as in most societies, the stranger or visitor who is stronger than the native can displace the owner of the land. According to my informant, "too often slaves overpower their master's children and take control of their possessions as the heirs of the family, thereby displacing those who are really entitled to the property or home".

23. Ritswo mba wakan ki pwa u usa be.

The grinding stone of a poor woman's son does not grind sand.

This proverb is used to discourage self-pity. People should face life's realities, because no poor man ever feeds on sand.

It is also used to warn a braggart not to be too presumptuous because he feeds sumptuously. After all even the poor feed on bread and not sand.

24. Sisa ba fa akwaen.

Yaws come in the guise of scabies. Because appearances are deceptive, you must look out!

25. Ta ja uzwuang ka tika puti titawe ti ba sha akom mbakun.

After we have chased away the hawk then we can look for the killed chicken.

That is, drive away the hawk first before you search for its victim.

Below is my informant's explanation of the proverb:

When a nation is faced with external problems but notices also that there are some subversive elements within it, they use this proverb to sue for internal solidarity. It seeks to play down fault-finding and dissension from within so that there can be a general rallying of internal forces in order to tackle the outside attack. Their differences could be settled later when success has been achieved.

26. Upam shae arukum.

A toad's pride.

That is, empty pride.

The toad is seen very often to swell beyond its natural size. This observation is not lost to the Kuteb who applies this action to the behaviour of human beings. Thus any person who boasts or claims that he can fight a superior opponent or do anything which is beyond his capabilities is likened to the toad.

27. Uwo ti rinwaen a taibe, sapang ki ci kijab.

Where there is no salt, pepper (makes market) is very marketable.

This is on all fours with the English "When the cat is away the mice will play".

Cf. The French:

"Absent le chat les souris dansent."

The following are other African versions:

"When the cat goes on a journey, the house becomes a home for mice" (Yoruba)

"When lions have gone, hyenas dance" (Kikuyu)

"When the owner of the house goes out from the house, firefly enters the backyard" (Oron)

"Since the leopard was absent from the bush the bush-cat became king" (Gweabo)

"The dog barks after the hyena has left" (Sironga)

"When a man is away the monkey eats up the maize and enters the farm-hut" (Tiv)

What the proverb is saying is simply this: When the employer is away, his employees take advantage of his absence to do what they normally will not do in his presence.

28. Uwran si miji.

Friendship is like a palm-tree fibre.

A palm-tree fibre can hurt or prick you if not handled carefully and wisely. According to my informant it can also easily snap when difficulty arises. Similarly, your tight friend can easily disappoint you during difficult times. Therefore don't disclose all your secrets to your friends.

NOTES

1. I wish to seize this opportunity to thank Mr. Ahmadu I. Musa, a former student of the University of Jos and a Kuteb, who supplied all the information used in this paper.

Also my thanks go to the various Kuteb elders who spared the time to contribute each his own mite.

Finally I am most indebted to my wife, a librarian, for, as usual, removing the infelicities of English expressions from the first draft of this paper.

2. Evans-Pritchard 1963^b: 109:
With regard to the possibility of some general conclusions being reached, a curious fact has struck me when renewing my interest in Zande proverbs—I am astonished that it did not strike me before—namely that whilst the Azande in common with other African peoples are rich in proverbial sayings I cannot recollect having heard a single Nuer proverb.
3. I here record similar observations of other collectors of proverbs:
 - (i) Some nations seem to have lost many of their oldest proverbs. Some are poorer than others in proverbial lore and do not give the student a full chance of getting a complete picture of their people's characteristics. (Andrew Ivanovich Guershoon, speaking about Russian proverbs. See Champion 1966: xcv.)
 - (ii) The Germans are not remarkable for their proverbs, probably from an aversion to the aphoristic style; they have doubtless their proverbial phrases like all other countries, but I have not seen any regular collection of them. (Bonser and Stevens 1930: XL.)
 - (iii) One of the most striking and, at first glance, confounding facts which we meet is that all native peoples do not have a store of proverbs, and that it is impossible to find any very good reason for the presence of proverbs in one race and their absence in another. We are inclined, loosely, to think of all the various tribes of the South Seas as being in one way or another members of the same culture group. It is, therefore, surprising, to say the least, to discover that while the Maoris, the Hawaiians, the Jiji-Islanders, and, to a certain extent, the Melanesians of the south-east Solomon Islands, the natives of the Loyalty Group, and the Samoans have an abundance of proverbial literature, the Australians and the inhabitants of Papua and the surrounding islands have none. (Whiting 1931: 59-61.)
4. This is a normal ethnographic approach employed by many serious investigators. See e.g. Herzog 1933; Long 1876: 38-95; Firth 1926: 134-153, 245-70; Arewa and Dundes 1964: 70-85; Evans-Pritchard 1963^a: 4-7; 1963^b: 109-112; 1964: 1-5.
5. The reasons why all nations have proverbs in common are not far to seek. Whereas it is true that all nations have their own peculiar ways, owing largely to the influence of environment and climatic conditions, of expressing the same idea, it is also true that all nations treat certain phases of human life as well as certain characteristics of the human being which are identical the world over, more or less in the same way. As Petrovitch (1966: Ixxiv) aptly says: "All nations think alike, have the same or similar desires, aspirations, and even humour, satire, etc." Cf. Maur 1885.

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A Roof Over One's Head

by D. R. Rosevear

We feel sorry for the homeless, those vagrants who march the country roads or shuffle furtively along the streets of our cities seeking out a vacant bench or a sheltered nook where, wrapped in newspapers, they can doss down for the night. We think of them not as having no sitting-room with its comfortable armchair and TV, nor as devoid of a breakfast table at which, to the accompaniment of snap, crackle and pop, the morning journal can be propped against the coffee-pot, but always as having no certain and secure place in which to lay down their heads for a night's rest beneath the protection of a sound roof.

Looking back, I can see now, though it didn't worry me a great deal at the time, that I was for an appreciable part of my early years in Africa not a greatly different case. I had, of course, always—or nearly always—some sort of a house which I might call my own. But it was often far distant; far at least in the sense of time if not as regards actual mileage, for every distance was covered by foot at a slow pace over tortuous paths often tree-strewn or shin-deep in mud or with other hindrances. One might, it is true, be surrounded by creature comforts, all tidily packed up by the household staff in dirty dust-ridden newspapers and carried in "chop-boxes" on the heads of carriers; but the question for a lot of the time was always "what sort of a roof for the night?". And this, in a climate characterized by a torrential rainy season, was for at least six or eight months of the year no idle speculation.