

The Epistemological Significance of Proverbs : An Africa Perspective

Author(s): Sylvanus INIOBONG UDOIDEM

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The Epistemological Significance of Proverbs : An Africa Perspective

I. INTRODUCTION.

« Most African languages are rich with proverbs. In many cases, failure to grasp an African proverb is considered to be tantamount to failure to grasp the subtleties, the nuances and the didactic finesse of African Wisdom. For besides being a didactical saying, a proverb in African tradition is a store-house of wisdom and philosophy which is fraught with wit, rhetoric, humour and poetic values » (1).

The use of proverbs is a type of human communication. Like most communication, it is basically a giving and a receiving of meanings. Strawson attempts to show, among other things, that *« certain general conclusions about the world can be gained from an analysis of how we speak » (2)*. Developmental psychologists such as Piaget and cultural anthropologists such as Boas, pay attention to the way a people divide up and name their reality because this is believed to be indicative of the general conceptual thinking or cognitive operation in that culture. Most anthropologists and ethnologists have agreed that Africans are proverbial in their mode of expression or speech.

Aquessy points out that *« every African society is a treasure-*

(1) Aloysius M. Lugira : *African Religion : A Prolegomenal Essay* (Omenana Publishers, Zaïre and Massachusetts, 1981), p. 55.

(2) Peter F. Strawson : *Individuals : An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics* (London, 1959).

trove of proverbs » (3). For example, among the Cross-River State people of Nigeria, the Ibibio language (like most other African languages) is very rich in proverbs. (It must be noted that when I use the expression « African language », my specific example is the Ibibio language as a prototype of the former). In Ibibio culture, the master story-teller, the orator, the adviser or the wise man, if he is speaking to local listeners, often needs to use a lot of proverbs not only to captivate and retain the attention and interest of his audience but also to stress and concretize the main issues under discussion. Essien observes that « *the use of proverbs as education tools would seem to fit in well with the traditional African pattern of education which is, for life's sake, pragmatic and communalistic in approach* » (4).

The natural questions to ask are : if proverbs are so important in communication among Africans, of what significance are they to the African mode of understanding and knowing ? Of what significance is « proverbialization » (the art of speaking in proverbs and of understanding them) to an African apperceptive mode ?

As a medium of communication, one who speaks in proverbs initiates communication, encodes it and, at the same time, expresses his mode of perception. The receiver or hearer accepts the message, decodes it, interprets and adds meaning in line with his own experience. The basic problem of any philosophy is epistemology (or the theory of knowledge) — the method which the mind follows in order to arrive at reliable knowledge. It is significant to note that, despite all the generalizations made by scholars (5) concerning proverbs and the African people, no one to our knowledge has so far investigated or articulated the epistemological basis and significance of proverbs in African culture.

The pertinent question is : what is the mode of understanding of one who hears and understands proverbs ? Sometimes, the wording of proverbs does not directly relate to the context or situation at hand yet, in the utterance of a proverb, some knowledge is communicated to all present. The subsequent questions that could be raised are : How do Africans know what they claim to know ? What are their basic assumptions about things ? What

(3) Honorat Aquessy : « Traditional African Views and Apperceptions » in *Introduction to African Culture*, co-edited by Alpha I. Sow and Ola Balogun (France : Unesco, 1979, p. 106).

(4) Patrick P. Essien : *Proverbs As Cultural Tools of Education in Nigeria* (Nigerian Chronicle Press, 1981), p. 28.

(5) See A.L. Boadi : *The Language of the Proverb in African Folklore* (edited by Dorsen ; Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1972) ; H. Gaden : « Proverbes et maximes peuls et toucouleurs » in *Oral Literature in Africa* (1970) ; Donald C. Simmons : « Oron Proverbs » in *African Studies*, 19, 1960.

method must the mind follow in order to arrive at what the Africans accept as certain knowledge ? These are philosophical issues which cannot all be answered within the scope of this article. However, it does seem that proverbs as a mode of communication have a lot to tell us about the African apperceptive mode and for this reason we shall investigate their epistemological significance. Our basic thesis is that proverbialization involves memory, creativity and knowledge and these three dimensions are constitutive in any epistemic process.

For the purpose of conceptual clarification, an operational definition of some key concepts like « epistemology » and « proverb » must be given.

II. WHAT IS EPISTEMOLOGY ?

According to Webster's Dictionary, this word is defined as « *the study or theory of the origin, nature, methods and limits of knowledge* ». Therefore, it is clear that it is not only a psychological description of mental states (as in the case of the Aristotelian epistemology) but that it also involves « *a critique of their cognitive claim, the assessment of their veracity and validity and the eliciting of those criteria by which such claim may be attested* » (6). In relation to the topic under discussion, of what significance are proverbs in justifying cognitive claims or in the assessment of their veracity ? These are the questions that this article will seek to elucidate.

III. THE ORIGIN AND KINDS OF PROVERBS.

The Ibibio word for proverb is *Nke*. The word is a generic name for all those types of verbal expression which have more than one meaning — the second having a hidden and more profound one. Such expressions are generally short and are couched in words that are simple, pleasant, often picturesque and entertaining and easy to remember. Esen has identified three types of *Nke* : the rhyming couplet, the folktale and the epigram (or

(6) C.I. Lewis : « An Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation » (Open Court, 1946). Reprinted in *The Foundation of Knowledge* (edited by C. Laudesman ; Englewood Cliffs, N.J., Prentice Hall, 1970), pp. 17-19.

proverb properly so-called). He also notes that these names are mere labels borrowed from the English language to describe distinctive literary forms that are uniquely African (7). Our interest will be concentrated on the epistemological significance of proverbs. However, suffice it to remark that the latter are legacies derived from diverse and complicated cultural sources (like folk-tales, human experiences and natural phenomena) and have been handed down through the ages. Thus they have their origin in communal experiences and observations which are usually in agreement with the conception of life and the world-view held by members of the community. The originators remain obscure or unknown. If a person quotes his grandfather as his authority for a particular proverb, he is not seriously attributing the saying of his grandfather as the originator but merely saying that he heard it from him.

IV. THE DEFINITION AND FUNCTION OF PROVERBS.

Proverbs are the kernel which contains the wisdom of the people. They are philosophical and moral expositions shrunk to a few words and form a mnemonic device for effective communication. In the words of John Russell, a proverb is « *the wisdom of many and the wit of one* ». Emerson describes it as the « *literature of reason or a statement of absolute truth* ».

Its unique function is usually to recommend procedures and attitudes for meeting recurrent problems. As Kenneth Burke puts it : « *proverbs are explicit moral and empirical strategies for dealing with situations* » (8). According to Obiechina, apart from conveying linguistic realities, proverbs can become « *an artistic device for giving complexity to narrative, unity to form, coherence and pattern to action and direction to moral and social insight* » (9). Their easy pleasantness is, however, like the sweet coating of a pill. Their curative therapeutic essence (that is, their didactic or moral message) lies below the outer coat of sweet sounds and exciting word-images. The outer sweetness is intended merely to help the listener swallow the hidden ingredients and to internalize, without tears, the behavioural norms, folk attitudes and societal values that they convey.

(7) A.J.A. Esen : *Ibibio Profile* (Paico Press, Lagos, 1982), pp. 21-43.

(8) In Essien : *op. cit.*, p. 10.

(9) Emmanuel Obiechina : *Culture, Tradition and Society in West African Novels* (New York, Syndics of Cambridge University Press, 1975).

No one may claim real knowledge of any African language or the ability to use it effectively if he does not know a good many *Nke* (or their equivalents). It is a sign of facility or mastery to be able to galvanize a discourse or argument with apt and appropriate proverbs but their wrong use or interposition where they do not fit into the discussion or do not clarify or illumine the issues at hand, is considered a shame by knowledgeable speakers.

As a strategy of discourse, a proverb divests itself of its common language function of direct description and opens the way to a more fundamental mode of perception. Proverbs in this context are used to juxtapose readily facts and ideas that might not at first appear to be interrelated. For example, in the Ibibio language, in a proverb that is characterized as a couplet, the two lines say completely and totally unrelated things. A typical example of such a couplet is :

*« Ekpát eyop oduo ikimeke nsan,
Owo mfat ana idayake okon ».*

Literally translated, this proverb reads :

*« The palm-tree falls but never gets pierced by thorns.
The man with itchy skin lies down at night but does not sleep ».*

In the English couplet, the thought in the second line may be a continuation of, or at least closely related to, the thought started in the first line. An example of such a relation would be typified by Alexander Pope's

*« Know then thyself, presume not God to scan
The proper study of Mankind is man »*

but in the Ibibio *Nke*, the thought in the first line (the palm-tree falling and of what happens or does not happen to it) is not followed up in the second line : rather, a completely different thought is introduced. The fate of the man with an itchy skin is not in any way related to the fortunes of the palm-tree.

At first sight, one might think there is a relationship of comparison whereby one could read the couplet in this way : « Just as a palm-tree falls down without being pierced by thorns, so a man with an itchy skin lies down at night but does not sleep ». This would be a *non-sequitur* since nobody expects a palm-tree to be pierced by thorns, whereas a man is supposed to sleep when he lies down at night. However, the structure of such proverbs is indicative of the apperceptive mode and the thought pattern of

Africans. By speaking in proverbs, the Ibibio finds that an absolute split between discovery and invention is not only unviable but unwarranted. What therefore a proverb creates, it discovers, what it discovers, it invents. In a discourse, where verbalization is no longer possible, proverbs become the only mode of expression that allows for the articulation and the perception of the unsayables and it is this possibility that allows for creativity. For example, if that which is understood is the unsayable then the content of that which is understood is the product of creativity. The problem here (which will be discussed later) is how it is that this independent creative act serves for a communal understanding in the context of discourse. This problem introduces us to the issue of memory.

V. MEMORY AND PROVERBS.

The proverbs of the Ibibio were recorded in the memory of the ancestors and handed down by word of mouth. Proverbs represent a people's philosophy. A whole range of human experience could be expressed in graphic and concise form and the wider implications of specific situations brought to mind. According to the Greeks (as is evident in Plato's *Meno* and the *Symposium*), memorization is a form of knowledge. After all, as Aristotle would like to argue, what is it that is in the intellect that was not first in the senses? The ability of the intellect to identify that which the senses have perceived, is an act of memory. Bartlett has postulated the existence of two kinds of memorization:

- a) a rote recapitulation memory involving an exact trace;
- b) a reconstructive memory which reproduces material that is meaningfully learned and integrated into the existing cognitive structures (10).

These two forms of memory are involved in proverbialization. The function of memory gives credence to the assertion that « *the individual acts in a context where tradition determines the order of symbolic references which give meaning to everything that he undertakes and completes* » (11).

Through proverbs and memory, the individual and the group are linked to each other by a thousand indissoluble ties. A pro-

(10) In S.D. McLaughlin: « Cognitive Process and School Learning: A Review of Research on Cognition in Africa » in *African Studies Review*, Vol. XIX, N° 1, April 1976, p. 83.

(11) Aquessy: *op. cit.*, p. 93.

verb thus becomes a way in which the individual expresses the primacy of society. The man who proverbs, puts his individual speech in the cosmic perception of his society, reinforcing his personal point of view by objectifying its validity and indirectly paying tribute to himself as a possessor of wisdom which is common to all. A proverb enables this perceptive mode to shift not only from one domain to another but also from one period to another. Such a perceptive mode reveals itself in the most contemporary behaviour as well as in the most ancient gestures, in the simplest and most deliberate physical occupations as well as in purely intellectual undertakings, in relations between people as well as in individual attitudes.

Probably, the « sense of detachment and generalization » inherent in proverbs might explain why they have such influence on their speakers and hearers. By seeming to remove the audience far enough from the situation so that it can see no danger of getting immediately involved, it exercises a controlling force that makes problems seem more impersonal, universal and less present (12). It is precisely because a proverb is universal and impersonal that each person can identify with it. It is said that « *a good proverb speaker, besides holding the attention of his audience, always provokes laughter or tears as the case may be* » (13). Memory, therefore (in the context of proverbs) includes learning, retaining, recognizing and recalling.

VI. PROVERBS AND CREATIVITY.

If a proverb is seen only from its stylistic and poetic point of view, one is incapable of analysing and appreciating the creativity and depth involved in proverbialization. Proverbs are the creative exhibits of the wise men of old. It takes a creative mind to formulate and articulate a saying that can be universally accepted. Apart from this creative origin, there is another dimension which should be emphasized. We claim that the ability to speak in proverbs (even though one is not the originator) is a creative art as the choice and aptness of the latter is an indication of the speaker's creative capacity and the one who hears and understands them is involved in creative understanding.

As Casenave has remarked, there are two kinds of creativity :

(12) W.E. Abraham : *The Mind of Africa* (Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1963), p. 149.

(13) Essien : *op. cit.*, p. 74.

the first is that which follows the rules of the system in actualizing potential meanings ; the second is that which violates the rules of combination (14). The production of something new is entailed in both kinds. Proverbs promote the recovery of order through a new context. The creativity that is involved goes beyond proposing new meanings — it reorganizes our vision of reality. A proverb serves as an occasion for creative reflection : it is a framework of collaborative and contributive creativity both for the speaker and the listener. The former gains a new insight into the given situation that necessitates the application of a particular proverb. For the latter, this provides a frame for reflection, creative insight and an awareness of a new reality. A proverb helps the mind to become investigative and creative. It serves as a Socratic midwife to the intellect or mind which is labouring to give birth to knowledge. Its aim is evocative rather than definitive ; it provides a suggestive framework from which the listener can involve himself in an intellectual analysis which results in the creation of his own understanding. Proverbalization is thus a private and relatively unstructured process that results in the creation of new ideas and insights.

As long as a proverb is not identical with a particular form, it can be adjusted to fit reality better as revealed through the immediacy of experience. As Essien so beautifully puts it : « *proverbs seem to resemble an elastic structure which might change its form yet maintain its beliefs and character* » (15). Proverbs are cultural knowns. There are no rules as to which is to be used at any particular time. The right choice, suitability and applicability depend on the perspicacity and skill of the speaker. Two people could be talking about the same thing or discussing the same issue and both could use two different proverbs. Although the substance of what they are communicating would be understood, the one who uses a more suitable proverb is said to be more creative in providing insight to the case or situation under discussion.

Proverbs in themselves have a content of meaning independent of any given situation or context. Their universality is such that they could be used as any frame for perception. When a proverb is spoken, the discourse is made available for inspection and evaluation without appealing to the speaker's intentions. It therefore opens a specific event and establishes its relation to the cosmic world. In proverbalizing, therefore, one is always in the dimension of truth as proverbs reveal the true meaning and significance of human language. What is the relationship between language

(14) Gerald Casenave : « Taking Metaphor Seriously » in *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, XVII, N° 1, 1979, p. 21.

(15) In *ibid.*, p. 73.

and meaning ? We understand not what people understand but what they say about what they understand. My understanding is always mine. What I say about what I understand is a different thing. What people understand from what I say is quite different from what I say. It must, however, be noted that, although proverbs reveal something about the status of language, they are not co-extensive because, though found in all languages, not every linguistic expression is proverbial.

As well as revealing the limitation of human language, they also reveal and open the way to the world of the unspeakables. They reveal the perspicacity of the human mind in making a leap from the known to the unknown and from the unknowing to the knowing. They reveal the power of the human mind to create a new content by transferring relations and thereby generating new correlates. In proverbializing, one is struck by the mysterious availability of the unsayables. This is similar to what Heidegger says of those thinkers who speak fundamentally by « *listening to the silent saying as the unsaid in the tradition of thinking* » (16).

The cognitive significance of proverbs is grounded in the cognitive significance of the similarity of events. The referential dimension of proverbs ushers our mental state to pre-thematized beginnings where experience with things can lead to a novel characterization of things. In this sense, a proverb goes beyond language to things and thus becomes a creative response to reality ; a sort of appropriation that allows for a perceptual content that is, in itself, new precisely because of its relation to what had been.

VII. PROVERBS AND KNOWLEDGE.

Among the Ibibio, if a young person uses many *Nke* to flavour his discussion or drive home his argument, he is often looked upon as « *Eyen akan-eren* » (« the son of an old man »). This is not meant in a literal or biological sense as the speaker may, in fact, be the son of a relatively young or middle-aged man. What the expression means is that such a speaker has taken possession of the full linguistic inheritance bequeathed to his generation by the older ones. Such individuals are considered as being knowledgeable, wise, sophisticated, versatile and having a

(16) Martin Heidegger : *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York : Harper and Row, 1971), pp. 15-87.

moral character on whom the elders can rely for the continuity of the shared values of the people.

Apart from seeing the ability to use proverbs as a sign of knowledge, there is a different kind of relationship between them which we will now examine. We claim that knowledge is obtained through self-effort in ordinary daily existence. Such self-effort is at work when one utters, hears and understands a proverb.

Among the Ibibio, the understanding is that reality cannot be separated from personal experience. The individual is not a passive spectator but an active participator of the events of life. For one who uses proverbs, his epistemic process is open : neither the person nor the proverb he uses claims to have all the answers nor necessarily the final answer. Knowledge in proverbs, therefore, consists of the recovery of man's original creativity, spontaneity and wholeness of perception. It is here that the former underscore their epistemological significance. In proverbalizing, one enters into a world which precedes one. Through proverbs, one brings oneself to a sense which will never be perceived anywhere by anyone — a sense which is not a superior point of view. In fact, one could say that it is not a point of view (in the popular meaning of the phrase) but an inversion into the universal. The hearer is involved in an intellectual analysis which results in a creative understanding or awareness of a given event or situation. This kind of awareness is knowledge. What is understood is a personal creation but since it comes from the cultural given, its content becomes universal and common to all.

It is on this basis that we can talk about the communality of knowledge. This is why, as soon as an African utters a proverb, he speaks of things in their absence and in terms of their non-perceived sides. A proverb therefore opens the way and sends the mind back to the beginnings. The individual journeys back and forth, returning with a grasp of the new situation in the light of the eternal origins, the latter being authenticated by the given situation or the lived experience. In this sense, one could say that the person who makes use of proverbs (either as a speaker or as a listener) has knowledge. The kind of knowledge involved in the philosophical attitude of proverbs does seem to aid one in coping with whatever position one has in the kaleidoscopic chain of events in life.

VIII. *CONCLUSION.*

The acceptance of memory, creativity and knowledge as the matrix of any epistemic process shows the significance of pro-

verbs. Since a proverb involves all three, one can rightly conclude that it is a pivot for the organization of human knowledge.

An approach which considers the former only as a language style would be incapable of appreciating its epistemic matrix. A significant dimension is the sense of unity of African thought which a proverb displays. At the level of intellectual formulation, and considering the special mode of expression, memorization should be conceived of not only as a repetition of identical images and words but as a dynamic process of using metaphors indicative of the creativity of each different group or individual who proverbializes. People develop styles of their own which are characteristic of their mode of perception. The choice of proverbs is an indication of the speaker's creative capacity. In short, unity of thought does not mean repetition of the same intellectual or physical gestures or the same images — it expresses a common dynamic mentality which, when confronted with similar problems or situations, produces similar thoughts. This is the reason why proverbs can give one a glimpse of the African view of the world (17).

A proverb places our perception within a communal world-view. It entails memory or calling to mind what had been as a way of articulating the new given situation. It also has the characteristic of making the new understanding objective.

It ushers in a new dimension of perception which allows a subjective disposition to be seen as objective knowledge. It serves as a medium of creative cognition. As a Fulani proverb says, « *one does not know everything ; all that one knows is a part of everything* ». How does one know a part of everything except through a proverb ? Knowledge of the part is also knowledge of the whole but the whole understood as incomplete. The situation is phenomenal. One can share the knowledge of everything precisely by having access to a part of it made available through a proverb. The understanding, therefore, of the epistemological significance of proverbs is crucial if one is to understand and appreciate knowledge and the apperceptive mode of the African.

Sylvanus INIOBONG UDOIDEM,
Catholic University of America, Washington D.C.

(17) Aquessy : *op. cit.*, p. 108.