

TOWARDS AN AFRICAN LITERATURE

III: RIDDLES AND PROVERBS

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IN African traditional literature, the *riddle* and the *proverb* have much in common. Both are based upon common experience and both are presented in symbolic form. The *riddle* presents a mental problem. The *proverb* is a criticism of life. Both are products of the popular mind and therefore both reflect prevalent attitudes. But while the *riddle* is hardly more than a form of entertainment, the *proverb* is more serious and has a didactic intent. Hence riddling is associated mainly with the younger people, while the propounding and expounding of proverbs is associated with the older people, especially the men.

RIDDLES

1. The Enigma

The most popular type of African *riddle* (called *iqhina*, 'a knot' in Xhosa) is like the *enigma* of Classical Greece. The 'knot' is concealed under obscure language, and whoever has to 'untie' it must grasp the associations or similarities. The subject may be anything within common experience—man, parts of the human body, animals, plant life, the heavenly bodies, etc.

In the following specimens the solution is indicated in the brackets:—

- (1) "I have twin sons standing on either side the edge of a mountain-forest, supporting the forest in case it tumbles down" (human ears, head and hair).
- (2) "I have an old crone standing all alone in the centre of a vast plain" (the human navel).
- (3) "I have a woman who carries a bearded baby on her back" (maize-stalk, maize-cob covered with female filaments).
- (4) "I have a sack full of corn. The corn is thrown away and the sack is cooked and eaten" (the stomach of a ruminating animal cooked as tripe).
- (5) "I have a woman. She has many many children and they are to be seen covering a great plain with the mother in their midst. But whenever her husband approaches, she and her children hide away" (the moon, the stars and the sun).

Since the solution must always be given, some of the riddles become so hackneyed that very often the solution is screamed out even before the proposing is complete. But every fresh experience in life provides scope for originality, and every new riddle is greeted with delight and admiration. Modern civilization has therefore enriched this field: "I have four people, two walking abreast ahead, and the other two following abreast and trying to catch up with those ahead. But whenever the front pair decides to wait, those following behind stop dead where they are" (the wheels of an ox-waggon or motor-car).

It is interesting to find that the famous riddle proposed by the Greek Sphinx to Oedipus is known to many Africans. What is more, many who have never heard it before are able to solve it as soon as it has been presented. It has slight variations: "I have an animal. In the morning (or at sunrise) it goes on four feet; at noon it goes on two; in the afternoon (at sunset or at nightfall) it goes on three."

2. The Bird Riddle

The essence of the *bird riddle* is to display one's knowledge of the ways and habits and/or colour-markings of birds. It takes the form of a dialogue between two young men, or boys, in the presence of an audience. Instead of 'tying a knot', the proposer makes an assertion about a certain bird, likening it to a certain type of person. His interlocutor, who plays the part of a challenger, calls upon the proposer to point out the associations or similarities. This form of entertainment gives plenty of scope for wit and humour.

In the following specimens Ch. = Challenger, Pro. = Proposer:

Ch.: Do you know the birds?

Pro.: I do know the birds.

Ch.: What bird do you know?

Pro.: I know the wagtail.

Ch.: What about him?

Pro.: That he is a shepherd.

Ch.: Why so?

Pro.: Because he is often to be seen amongst the flock.

The Challenger must all the time pretend not to be impressed. So, as soon as the likeness has been established, he says deprecatingly, "Ugh, you don't know the birds!" The Proposer replies emphatically, "I say I do know the birds!" Then they start again on some other bird:

"I know the owl . . . That he is a sorcerer . . . Because he always comes out in the depths of night to kill other animals."

"I know the butcher-bird . . . That he is a hunter and smeller-out of sorcerers . . . Because he impales the weaker birds and insects on thorn-bushes."

"I know the female dove . . . That she is a lazy woman . . . Because instead of building a nest she collects a few twigs and lays her eggs on them."

"Again I know the female dove . . . That she is a jealous wife . . . Because she never allows her husband to go out without her."

When the Proposer has 'spent al his philosophye', he accuses his interlocutor of not knowing the birds, and thus becomes the Challenger. The interlocutor immediately accepts the challenge and says that he does know the birds. Then they go on. At the end the audience have to say who is the winner. But here freshness of idea, wit and humour count more than just the number of birds named. Some associations and similarities are so commonplace that even a child could discover them, e.g. the wagtail and the shepherd. A competitor who brought out the following was declared the winner even though he had no other birds to name on that day:

Ch.: What bird do you know?

Pro.: I know the white-necked raven.

Ch.: What about him?

Pro.: That he is a missionary.

Ch.: Why so?

Pro.: Because he wears a white collar and a black cassock, and is always looking for dead bodies to bury!

PROVERBS

In general African proverbs state universally accepted principles and give guidance as to conduct in particular circumstances. Some proverbs are self-explanatory, but most are couched in symbolic terms. The latter draw largely from animal life, many of them being related to well-known fables (animal stories). Indeed, while many proverbs are derived from fables, there are a few fables that would seem to have been created to illustrate existing proverbs.

The following specimens are drawn from the Nguni (Xhosa-Zulu), the Tsonga (Ronga-Tswa, etc.) and the Sotho (Sotho-Tswana) groups of languages. The language-group is indicated only in those cases where the writer is not sure if the particular

proverb is to be found in the other two. Those that are not marked are to be found in all three groups, word for word. Where the fundamental idea is the same but expressed in different ways, this is indicated too.

Self-explanatory

- (1) "A chief is no chief to his own wife."
- (2) "Where there is no wealth there is no poverty" (Sotho).
- (3) "Wealth and poverty lie together" (Nguni and Sotho).

Symbolical

- (1) "A baby that does not cry dies in the skin-shawl (on its mother's back)", i.e. if you would have your grievances redressed, voice them without fear.
- (2) "The cow kicks the one who milks it" (Nguni).
"The buffalo goes for the one who hunts it" (Tsonga)
"The fire burns those who sit by it" (Sotho).
i.e. Trouble comes to those who court it.
- (3) "The elephant does not die of one broken rib" (Tsonga)
i.e. A strong man is not crushed by one piece of misfortune.
- (4) "The sweat of the dog dries in his own hair (or skin)",
i.e. The efforts of an obscure person are never acknowledged, however heroic they may be.

The following are related to fables:

"The rock-rabbit has no tail because he trusted to others (to bring him one)." After the creation, when all the animals were invited to come and receive their tails, the Rock-rabbit, preferring to sit and bask in the sun, requested the Monkey to bring him a tail. But on being supplied with the extra tail, the Monkey decided to add it on to his own. Hence the 'knot' on the Monkey's tail. This proverb exhorts people to do things themselves and not to trust to others to do things for them.

The Hare, pursued relentlessly by the Lion, took refuge in a small hole. Unable to enter, the Lion stood over the hole. But he soon noticed that the sight of his whiskers was enough to set the Hare trembling. So he pulled off his whiskers, placed them over the hole and went away. Every time the Hare tried to venture out, he saw the whiskers and quickly withdrew into the hole where he eventually died of hunger. "Do not be scared by the Lion's whiskers (Do not panic over a false alarm)."