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*From Centre to Margins:
Multicultural Aspects of the Origins of Proverbs*

Proverbs have been considered the flowers of popular wit and the treasures of popular wisdom. Mihai Eminescu (1989: VI, VIII) called them “exquisite flowers of human reason”, “jewels of thought” and George Muntean (1969: 44) spoke about them as being the “wealth and wisdom of mankind”. Homer referred to them as “epea pteroenta”: words with wings. (see George Muntean, 1969: 34 and Tudor Vianu, 1971: 6) Proverbs are highly informative sources for anyone who wants to have access to the traditions and popular beliefs of a community of people, since they are “an encyclopaedia of a society’s existence”. (G. Muntean, 1969: 52-53) They are common to virtually all communities and though each culture has its own set of proverbs, many times the same kernel of wisdom can be recognised under different cultural and linguistic coating.

Although it is very difficult to trace proverbs to their origins back in time, their existence from times immemorial is beyond a doubt. Many scholars trace their origins as far back as the beginnings of human society and consider them as one of the first fields of science of humanity, containing its wisdom. (see George Muntean, 1969: 36) Proverbs have been seen as characterised by both universality and diversity. On the one hand, they have been used by a great number of people in different parts of the world and at different periods in time, being deeply rooted in a wide variety of cultures worldwide. On the other hand, from this common, central kernel, proverbs have further developed, finally highlighting the specificity of each particular culture.

Cezar Tabarcea (1982: 120-140) offers a short history of proverbs in human culture. The oldest proofs of their existence have been found in some Asyro-Babylonian texts from the 4th millennium BC, which contain entire collections of proverbs. The 3rd millennium Egyptian texts also abound with proverbs, maxims, aphorisms. Another important source for a great number of proverbs is represented by the Bible, especially by two of its books: Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, which consist primarily in maxims about the practical, intelligent way to conduct one’s life. Psalms and other books from the Bible also contain pieces of advice, similar to those given in proverbs. The Bible remains a reference point in the history of proverbs, although people no longer recognise the connection to the Bible of many of the most common proverbs, while others have been modified in time. The philosophic and mythological literature of the North of India, cultural centre of the world, also abounded in aphorisms, especially between 1000 and 600 BC. It has been noticed that the Indian gnomic poetry was particularly skilful, as in no other part of the world. In Europe, the Greek culture was the first to have a tradition of proverbs and maxims, which had a great circulation. They belonged to such writers as Homer, Hesiod,

Socrates, Solon, Pythagoras, Plato, Aristotle, but there are also some that have uncertain origin. From Greece, they spread all around the world. Even the term *proverb* comes from the Greek word *paroimia* (see George Muntean, 1969: 33). The Romans took over the tradition of proverbs from the Greeks, but their contribution is important too, through such representatives as Cato the Elder, Plutarch, Quintilian, Julius Caesar. The term they used was *adagium*, meaning “worthy to be taken into consideration, to be memorised”. The Romans were known to make much use of proverbs, not only in literature, but also in their daily conversations. A great number of Latin proverbs and maxims survived in time due to the important role they played in rhetoric and oratory. Erasmus of Rotterdam’s collection of approximately 800 maxims taken from ancient Latin writers represents a marking point in the development of proverbs in human culture. The 16th century has been considered the century of proverbs: they were anthologised in many collections, many literary works contained a great number of proverbs, they infused the language of people more and more, from the palace courts to everyday use. The most important collections of proverbs were directly influenced by Erasmus’s works. The first collection of English proverbs was published in 1546 and was written by John Heywood: *Proverbs in the English Tongue*. After a short time, in Spain, there appeared two important collections: *Proverbios* (1552) by López de Mendoza and *Refranes o proverbios en castellano* (1555) by Hernán Núñez. In the 17th century the interest in proverbs increased: Gonzalo Correas’s work on proverbs *Vocabulario de refranes y frases proverbiales* (1624) is fundamental and so is J. Howell’s *Lexicon tetraglotton. An English-French-Italian-Spanish Dictionary, with Another Volume of the Choicest Proverbs in All the Said Tongues* (1660). In his masterpiece, *Don Quijote de la Mancha* (1605-1616), Cervantes made use of a great number of proverbs, most of which were put in the mouth of Sancho Panza. The 18th century, being dominated by reason, rejected the use of proverbs, but in the 19th century, they flourished again, due to the publication of several anthologies and many theoretical studies as well. Romanticism finally established the place of proverbs within literary works, as illustrations of folk wisdom. The 20th century marked another important moment, since writers started using older collections, anthologies and theoretical works to raise the interest in the systematic study of proverbs. The first work that systematised the study of proverbs was Archer Taylor’s *The Proverb* (1931).

Proverbs are rooted in folklore and, as such, they are related to other forms of folk literature, such as riddles, fables, ballads, that also have their origin in oral tradition. Some linguists even consider proverbs as deriving from different genres of folk literature, such as stories, nursery rhymes, jokes, songs, fairy tales, anecdotes, verbal charms, that contain certain set phrases and expressions, very similar to proverbs, which, in time, became independent from the literary work (see George Muntean, 1969: 37). Proverbs are considered simple poetic forms, presenting such fundamental prosodic features as rhyme, alliteration, rhythm etc. But, whichever their origin, their existence is obviously linked to that of other forms of folk literature.

Proverbs have been seen as characterised by universality, which does not imply that they express universal truths, but rather that they are common to all cultures and that they have been used by a great number of people in different parts of the world and at different periods in time. Proverbs are part of every community of people, virtually each past or present culture is known to have possessed its own stock of proverbs, maxims, sayings, etc. They constitute an informative source of folk knowledge, they reflect and are the result of social, cultural and political values and traditions of a certain community. They express a people's inherited wisdom and code of behaviour, "they are the philosophy of the many, the condensed experience and knowledge of ages" (Ulick Ralph Burke, 1892: XVIII). Proverbs are a means of transmitting accumulated experience, as an English proverb says, "A proverb is the child of experience" or as Don Quixote said "I think, Sancho, there is no proverb that is not true, all being maxims drawn from experience itself, the mother of all the sciences." (Miguel de Cervantes, 1950: I, 21) Proverbs present life in its many facets, covering social relations, emotions, the very nature of the human being, the condition of mankind, being thus an "encyclopaedia of the existence of a society" (Muntean 1969: 52, 53). It is the same idea expressed by Mihai Eminescu¹. Initially, proverbs were conceived as authoritative words, having the role of guiding people's behaviour, tracing the guidelines for their moral, religious, philosophic, legal behaviour, being the first unwritten set of laws of humanity. They were used to pass judgement, give advice, criticise or praise others etc., rather than to express universal truths.

Moreover, many proverbs coincide in their message in different cultures, reflecting the same kernel of wisdom. Some coincide only in their essence, but are expressed in different formal "coating", particular to each culture, and some, even coincide in their form. Gyula Paczolay (cited in Paul Hernadi and Francis Steen, 1999: 14), in his study on proverbs, found 106 proverbs that occurred in at least 28 of his 55 surveyed European languages and sometimes, even had additional equivalents in non-European tongues, such as Arabic, Persian, Sanskrit, Chinese or Japanese. This may be a consequence of three phenomena (see Cezar Tabarcea, 1982: 23 and Mihai Eminescu, 1989: IX-X):

1) most proverbs are the expression of similar experiences of life – in certain situations, regardless of the period of time or the cultural and geographical space they live in, people reveal the same kind of emotions: the same joy, sorrow, anxiety, etc.; many activities are common to all communities; there are universal phenomena, such as birth, death, weather conditions, seasons etc. which are reflected in each culture, and hence, in its proverbs²; proverbs are universal, expressing the essence of human experience³; this is how linguists explain the

¹ „Adunate la un loc, proverbele și zicătorile unui popor devin o carte a înțelepciunii sale istorice, sociale, politice, a sensibilității sale colective, căreia i se marchează amprenta specifică fiecărei unități istorice și etnice”. (Mihai Eminescu, 1989: X)

² Cf. „acele cugetări ale filozofilor, savanților și poezilor în care s-au cristalizat concluzii ale experienței atât de generale, încât oricine și le poate însuși” (Tudor Vianu, 1971: 5).

³ Cf. „limba mentală comună tuturor națiunilor” (Cezar Tabarcea, 1982: 23); „spiritul paremiologic universal” (Cezar Tabarcea, 1982: 36).

existence of similar or even identical proverbs in different parts of the world, far apart from each other, where the idea of loans or influences is absurd ;

2) many proverbs had a common origin (like the ones derived from the Bible or ancient writers, for example);

3) proverbs often “migrated” across linguistic borders or through many centuries, being borrowed from different languages and cultures.

But proverbs are characterised not only by universality, but also by a rather opposed feature, namely diversity.⁴ This is seen as a consequence of the fact that many proverbs have their origin in folklore, thus highlighting the specificity of each culture, its particular way of structuring reality. Although many life experiences are similar, there are also many which are specific to one community; its proverbs are called to reflect these experiences (see Cezar Tabarcea, 1982: 23, 36), they reflect the community’s spirituality, sensitivity, wisdom and sense of humour.⁵

Treasures of popular wisdom, proverbs have been considered the monuments of ancient philosophy. Their existence has been traced down from times immemorial and they exist in the collective consciousness of a wide variety of peoples, having their origin in oral tradition. Characterised by both universality and diversity, proverbs are common to virtually all human societies and express the condensed experience and knowledge of ages, but there are also many proverbs which have their origin in folklore, being specific of each particular culture.

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⁴ Cf. „Universalitatea adevărilor fundamentale se difuzează pe scara infinită a diversității ființei noastre, fie la nivelul colectivității, fie al personalității.” (Mihai Eminescu, 1989: X)

⁵ Cf. „toate se aseamănă și toate se diversifică, în jurul aceleiași conținut” (Mihai Eminescu 1989: IX); „adevărurile eterne sunt turnate de fiecare popor, ca și de fiecare personalitate, în tiparele sale de reprezentare, de sensibilitate și de comunicare verbală” (Mihai Eminescu, 1989: X).

Resumen

Los refranes representan tesoros de la sabiduría popular, monumentos de la filosofía antigua, y su estudio ha preocupado siempre a los sabios desde hace tiempos muy remotos. El presente trabajo intenta mostrar cómo, descendiendo de un tronco común, céntrico, los refranes han evolucionado, a través de los siglos, llegando a ser específicos para cada cultura. Como lo demuestra su origen, los refranes son caracterizados a la vez por universalidad y diversidad. Por un lado, son comunes prácticamente a todas las sociedades humanas y a menudo la misma idea se puede encontrar en varias culturas bajo distintas formas. Por otro lado, cada sociedad tiene su propio refranero, que subraya su especificidad cultural.