SOME ASPECTS OF ARABIC PROVERBS

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1 Introduction

Proverbs have been in use ever since man began to express his thoughts in a legible manner, and has been looking for the simplest way to state a truth based upon daily life and accrued experience, or, as a Dutch proverb says: "Proverbs are the daughters of daily experience". Because of their pithy and witty nature proverbs have been memorized and passed on from generation to generation, both orally and in writing. Hence we find collections of proverbs which had been current among all the civilizations of the ancient world including Egypt, Mesopotamia, Persia, Palestine, Greece and Rome[1]. Thus, ancient collections of proverbs, such as the Book of Proverbs and the Book of Ecclesiastes are found in the Old Testament and are ascribed to King Solomon, while the Apocrypha contain the Book of Ecclesiasticus, which is ascribed to Jesus the son of Sirach. Moreover, the thousands of 'scattered' proverbs in general which appear in the ancient and modern literatures, in addition to those used orally by all cultures around the world, prove that they have won a favoured status in the various languages, indicating a high level of rhetoric and eloquence. Furthermore, the didactic message which lies behind the majority of the proverbs makes their impact stronger than any other locutions. Thus, a situation by which unfulfilled hopes, especially those of which the outcome is most disappointing, is more powerfully expressed if it is described by the proverb: 'Hope is a good breakfast but a bad supper'. Equally, taking advantage of the misfortune of someone is better

[1] For a detailed discussion of ancient collections, see, in particular, Hulme 1902: Chapters 2 and 4.

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illustrated by the proverb: 'when the tree is fallen, all go with their hatchets'.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary "a proverb is short pithy saying in common and recognized use; a concise sentence often metaphorical or alliterative in form which is held to express some truth ascertained by experience or observation and familiar to all". This definition may generally apply to a score of similar terms, such as: adage, aphorism, apophthegm, axiom, code, dictum, formula, gnome, maxim, moral, mot, motto, precept, rule, saw, saying, slogan, sentence, tag, wisecrack and a few more. Dictionaries make usually an all out effort to distinguish between all these terms, albeit not very successfully, since we very often find contradictory definitions or such which may be applied to more than one term[2]. Arabic, as we shall see later, has 'solved the problem' by referring to all of the various terms as *amṯāl* or *ḥikam*[3]. However, since "no definition will enable us to identify positively a sentence as proverbial", as concluded by Taylor (1931:3), it would perhaps be more useful to note the conditions which make a proverb. According to J. Ward (Hulme 1903:8), six things are essential in order that an utterance be a proverb; it should be short, plain, common, figurative, ancient and true. These 'ingredients' seem to apply in principle to all proverbs, although some of these conditions may not always be true of all examples. Thus the proverb 'bad news travel fast' is not necessarily figurative, while the proverb 'If a man deceives me once, shame on him; if he deceives me twice, shame on me' is not particularly short. Moreover, since several proverbs have been coined in the 19th and 20th centuries (see e.g. Smith 1979:405), the condition for a proverb to be ancient does no longer apply, although, it is true that most of these 'late' sayings are usually referred to as 'aphorisms', which normally appear in collections of 'quotations' rather than collections of proverbs.

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[2] For detailed discussions concerning the difficulty of exact definition of 'proverb' see e.g. Hulme 1902: Ch. 1; Taylor 1931:3-5.

[3] For the etymology of the Arabic term, see below 2.2.

So far as their origin is concerned, it is not surprising that the majority of the proverbs current in a given language have their beginning shrouded in mystery, because the coiner is usually unknown. For even if we know that a certain proverb appears for the first time in a certain text, there is still uncertainty about its real origin. It is therefore feasible that many proverbs can have their roots in a specific culture or environment, although a large number of them may have 'travelled' from culture to culture.

The syntactical structure of proverbs shows that most of them constitute complete sentences, either simple, compound or complex, while a minority are elliptical sentences, i.e. their subject or predicate have been omitted. For example: 'like father, like son'. Or 'deeds, not words'.

A large number of proverbs take the form of conditional sentences, e.g. 'if you cannot bite, never show your teeth'. Or 'if you run after two hares you will catch neither'.

A great number of proverbs are in the imperative, denoting a firm advice. E.g. 'strike while the iron is hot'. Or 'don't empty the baby out with the bath water'.

A relatively large number of proverbs contain an element of comparison, indicating sometimes an advantage or preference (the last type is usually structured as 'better...than...'). E.g. 'a man of words and not of deeds is like a garden full of weeds'. Or, 'better be envied than pitied'.

A small number of proverbs appear in the interrogative or as rhetorical questions; e.g. 'why keep a dog and bark yourself?'. Or, 'who is worse shod than the shoemaker's wife?'.

However, the largest majority of proverbs in English are 'straightforward' affirmative sentences, e.g. 'knowledge is power'. Or, 'when love puts in, friendship is gone'.

Finally, many proverbs are rhyming or alliterative, probably in order to help the user memorize them more easily. E.g. 'man proposes, God disposes'. Or, 'manners maketh man'.

A cursory examination of a list of a thousand common English proverbs, picked at random, shows the following breakdown:

Affirmative (including elliptical) sentences	526
Imperative sentences	234
Conditional sentences	121
Sentences denoting comparison or preference	82
Interrogative (including rhetorical) sentences	37
Total	1000

Concerning the semantics of proverbs, it is worthwhile noting that most of them contain simple and 'straightforward' words which carry their denotational meanings, even though the proverb, as a whole, often carries, like an idiom, a deeper meaning. In this case, we may regard the proverb figurative or metaphorical. Thus, the proverb 'he who pays the piper calls the tune' connotes that money means power and 'Queen Anne is dead', means old news.

Although their contents vary, a large number of proverbs share similar constructions. Thus, 'inclusiveness' is often achieved by starting a proverb with the words 'all', 'every' and the like. E.g. 'all cats are grey in the dark', 'every dog has his day'. 'Generality' is often expressed by using the formula: 'He who/that...'; or 'He...who...'; or 'What...'. E.g. 'he who makes no mistakes makes nothing'; 'he that would eat the kernel must crack the nut'; 'he travels the fastest who travels alone'; 'what the eye doesn't see the heart doesn't grieve over'. 'Intimacy' may be achieved by direct approach using the 'second person' pronoun i.e. 'you'. E.g. 'You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours'; 'you cannot teach an old dog new tricks'. 'Firm existence or non-existence' may be noted by beginning the proverb with the words 'there is' or 'there is no'. E.g. 'there is a black sheep in every flock'; 'there is no smoke without fire'. 'A firm advice or warning' is usually conveyed by using the imperative, either positive or negative, i.e. 'Do!' and 'Don't!'. E.g. 'learn to walk before you run'; 'let sleeping dogs lie'; 'don't put all your eggs in one basket', 'never look a gift horse in the mouth'.

2 *The Arabic proverb*[4]

2.1 *Introduction*

It is worthwhile mentioning from the outset that many of the observations discussed above apply to Arabic proverbs. Hence, here too we may note without a shadow of doubt that the origin of many proverbs is unknown, except for those which have originated from the Qur'ān and classical Arabic poetry; that most Arabic proverbs have the form of complete sentences; and that semantically speaking, similar methods and devices are employed to achieve generality, inclusiveness, intimacy and the like.

Although it would be an impossible task to establish the exact number of collections of Arabic proverbs, both classical and modern, a rough estimate of those which have reached us and those to which references are made in the relevant literature proves the existence of hundreds. Moreover, researches relating to Arabic proverbs which have been conducted by Arab and non-Arab scholars highlight the importance attached to this literary genre, not only because it is 'one of the earliest forms of oral literature' (Serjeant 1983:115), but also because proverbs throw light on every aspect of pre-Islamic life, in spite of the difficulties in their interpretation and the uncertainties about their origin (cf. Nicholson 1969:31).

2.2 *The etymology of the word maṯal*

Although it is usually translated into English as 'proverb', the Arabic *maṯal* includes, as has already been stated above, all other cognate terms, having the phrases *ḥikma* or *qawl ma'ṯūr* as synonyms. The Arabic dictionaries define the root 'm.ṯ.l.' as meaning 'to resemble', 'to be or look like' and also 'to stand erect' or 'to appear before'. al-

[4] For detailed discussions of Arabic proverbs, see the works of Gibb (1966), Sellheim (1954) and Al-Dhubaib (1966).

Maydānī, quoting al-Mubarrad, says: "*al-maṯal maʾḫūḏ min al-miṯāl wa-huwa qawl sāʾir yušabbahu bihi ḥāl aṯ-ṯānī bi-l-awwal wa-l-aṣl fīhi at-tašbīh fa-qawluhum maṯala bayna yadayhi iḏā intaṣaba maʿnāhu ašbaha aṣ-ṣūra al-muntaṣiba wa-fulān amṯal min fulān ay ašbah bimā lahu al-faḍl*" (al-Maydānī, *Maǧmaʿ* I, 5).

"The word *maṯal* is based on the word *miṯāl*. It means a popular saying by which the condition of one (person, situation, etc.) is compared with another one. The etymology of the word is pertaining to 'resemblance'. Hence, when we say: 'he resembled before him' meaning 'he stood before him'. That is to say, he resembled the standing picture, and when we say 'a person bears more resemblance than another', it means that he has more resembling features (in comparison with another person)".

al-Mubarrad's definition suggests that the root meant originally 'to stand before', and owing to semantic shift, which occurred at a later phase, it denotes 'similarity' and 'resemblance' from which the meaning 'proverb' originated. This claim cannot be attested by other Semitic languages in which the root appears.

2.3 The origins of the Arabic proverbs

As indicated before and similarly to other languages, it is impossible, in the majority of the cases, to ascribe the *maṯal* to a particular coiner, or to find out under what circumstances it was coined. Many proverbs are, in fact, morals drawn from parables. However, even if the parable is well-known, we do not know for sure when, where and by whom it turned into a proverb. Instead we often find the 'formulae': *yuqālu* (it is said); *yuḍrabu bihi l-maṯal* (as the proverb says) or *ḏahaba maṯalan* (it became a proverb).

On the other hand, even when a proverb is attributed to a certain person, the source may still be unreliable, because of the custom to ascribe literary works and sayings to famous personages in order to grant them authority. This, as is well-known, has been the case as far as

poetry and *ḥadīṯ* literature are concerned, and therefore we may assume that proverbs had not escaped this fate too.

Hence, the origin of much greater number of proverbs remains obscure, and consequently open to speculations, or as put by aṯ-Ṯaʿālibī (*Ṯimār, passim*): "*fīhi aqāwīl muḫtalifa*" (it has different versions). For example, the proverb *ʿalā ahlihā/nafsihā taǧnī Burakiš* (Burakiš has brought disaster on her own people/on herself) has five different versions of 'background story' (cf. Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān*, s.v. *Burakiš*).

A great number of proverbs have emerged from ancient Arabic texts, both poetry and prose. Naturally, we tend to believe that in such cases there should be no doubt about the origin of the proverb. Nevertheless, it is always possible that the proverb had been in use before the composition of the text and that the writer was using (*taḍmīn*) a current proverb and even, in Frayha's phrase, "retouching" a common utterance (Frayha 1953:16).

An example for a proverb originated from poetry is the saying: *ṯalāṯatu l-mustaḥīlāt: al-ġūl wa-lʿanqāʾ wa-l-ḫill al-wafī* (the three impossibles: a demon, a phoenix and a loyal friend), which is attributed to Ṣafī ad-Dīn al-Hillī (1277-1339), whereas the proverb *aṣ-ṣawm fī š-šitāʾ al-ġanīma al-bārida* (fast in winter is easy prey) which is attributed to the Prophet Muḥammad is based on a *ḥadīṯ* (Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān* 84, s.v. *b.r.d.*).

In view of the 'simple' messages expressed by some of the proverbs we may assume that a large number of them have undergone a transitional process, starting as straightforward statements, and gradually gaining popularity by wide circulation. For example: *taḍarraʿ ilā ṭ-ṭabīb qabla an tamraḍ* (beseech the doctor before you fall ill); *al-ḫunfusāʾ iḏā mussat natinat* (when a beetle is touched it stinks); *aš-šarr qadīm* (there has always been evil).

The question as to whether all Arabic proverbs are indigenous productions is also enigmatic, since many of the views conveyed by these proverbs appear in the lores of other nations, some of which had never been in contact with the Arabs. Gibb (1966:38) thinks that proverbs coined in pre-Islamic days are original, and if parallels are found they

should be the result of collateral development. Post-Islamic proverbs include, however, many sayings which had originated from Syriac, Persian, Greek, Latin and other languages, a fact which can often be attested by their prosaic style. The Arabs usually call them *muwalladūn* i.e. 'half chaste'[5]. Modern Arabic contains many examples of those.

Finally, it is worthwhile mentioning that all the ancient collections of proverbs are entirely in classical Arabic[6], while the majority of modern collections are usually arranged by their geographical currency and are therefore in colloquial Arabic, in accordance with the dialect spoken in the area where these proverbs are used.

2.4 The structure of the maṯal

As mentioned before, all Arabic proverbs form complete sentences of which the most popular are: 1. Nominal. 2. Verbal. 3. Elliptical. 4. Imperative. 5. Conditional.

1. Nominal-sentence proverbs are those which do not have a verb and therefore have a subject followed by a predicate. E.g.: *waʿd al-ḥurr dayn* – a promise made by a free man is like a debt; *al-qird fī ʿuyūn ummihi ġazāl* – the monkey is regarded in his mother's eyes to be a gazelle; *al-ḥubb aʿmā* – love is blind.

2. Verbal-sentence proverbs are formed as typical classical Arabic sentences, *viz.* VS(O). E.g.: *ǧāʾa bi-qarnay ḥimār* – he returned with donkey's horns, i.e. he is lying; *sakata dahran wa-naṭaqa kufran* – he was quiet for a long time and when he said something at last it was blasphemy; *daḫala*

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[5] al-Maydānī distinguishes between original proverbs and *muwalladūn* and it is in this order that they appear in his collection.

[6] In exceptional cases references are made to equivalent proverbs in the spoken dialect. E.g. when al-Maydānī explains the proverb *iṭmaʾinna ʿalā qadr arḍika*, he says that this proverb is similar to the colloquial proverb *mudd riǧlak ʿalā qadr al-kisāʾ*. (See al-Maydānī, *Maǧmaʿ* 435).

fuḍūlī an-nār fa-qāla al-ḥaṭab raṭb – a meddler entered the fire and said the wood is wet.

3. A large number of proverbs are elliptical sentences, that is to say, they do not have a verb or predicate, but may themselves be used as predicates or similies within a wider context. They may be divided into five main types:

a. Two nouns in construct state. E.g.: *mawāᶜīd ʿUrqūb* – ᶜUrqūb's promises i.e. unfulfilled promises.
b. Noun followed by an adjective. E.g.: *ṭamᶜ aš̌ᶜabī* – Aš̌ᶜab's greed i.e. insatiable greed.
c. Noun followed by adverbial combination. E.g.: *quṣūr fī l-hawā'* – castles in the air.
d. Negation. E.g.: *lā fī al-ᶜīr wa-lā fī n-nafīr* – without any connection, neither here nor there.
e. 'Similative intensifiers' i.e. 'comparatives' followed by a proper name or a noun[7]. E.g.: *abṭa' min ġurāb Nūḥ'* – tardier than Noah's raven.

4. Many proverbs, especially those which are giving advice, warning or impose prohibition start with a verb in the imperative. E.g.: *is'al ʿan al-ǧār qabla d-dār wa-ᶜan r-rafīq qabla ṭ-ṭarīq* – enquire about the neighbours before you buy the house and about the companion before you set off; *ibᶜad ʿan aš̌-šarr wa-ġanni lahu* – keep away from troubles; *zur ġibban tazdad ḥubban* – visit people seldom and they will love you.

5. A large number of proverbs appear in a conditional construction, such as 'if...then...' or 'he who...will...'. For example: *iḏā zalla l-ᶜālimu zalla bi-zallatihi al-ᶜālamu* – if the scholar slips the whole world slips with him; *in kunta rīḥan fa-qad lāqayta iᶜṣāran* – if you are wind you

[7] Sellheim (1954:17) tells us that Ḥamza collected more than 1200, while I have counted 913 examples in al-Maydānī's *Maǧmaᶜ*.

are now facing a storm i.e. there is always someone stronger than yourself; *man ḥafara ḥufra waqaʿa fīhā* – he who digs a pit will fall into it.

2.5 The contents of the maṯal

The themes of the *maṯal* are numerous and variagated, and with some exaggeration we can say that no subject has escaped the perceptive eye of the anonymous proverb coiner.

Arabic proverbs deal with everyday events, human relations, beliefs, ambitions, aspirations, wishes, hopes, disappointments and shortcomings that are all an integral part of human life. Many proverbs, as we have already seen, have the form of "Do!" and "Don't!", i.e. command and prohibition, while others express warnings or give advice, admonition or example, all revealing the lessons learnt from long experience expressed with great firmness, yet with engaging simplicity.

It often happens that a proverb is based on a popular story known to both speaker and hearer, in which case - as opposed to the case of a proverb whose background is unknown - the transposition of the 'proverbial situation' to the 'present' situation greatly enhances the impact of the proverb. For example, a person called aṯ-Ṯaʿālibī divorced his wife because she was very dominant. Another person who wished to marry her came one day to aṯ-Ṯaʿālibī asking for information about her, but aṯ-Ṯaʿālibī's reply was: "*ʿiš raǧaban tara ʿaǧaban*" (live until the month of Raǧab and you will see wonders (see Maʿlūf 1969:964). The moral of the proverb is that since the month of Raǧab was one of the months during which no wars were launched, the wife will be obedient for a short period after which problems will certainly occur.

The style of proverbs is also of many kinds: Some proverbs are short prosaic sayings, but many are satirical and even cynical at times. However, behind this image there often lies an apparent bitterness against laws of nature.

Many proverbs prefer to express their notions indirectly; for example, proverbs based on the animal world ("*Tierfabel*"), leaving it up to the hearer to decode the message behind the words. It is well known

that many such proverbs were coined under the reign of despotic rulers and tyrants. Thus the proverb was allegorically used to avoid arousing displeasure. These are similar to the fables of Bidpai (Baidabā') known in Arabic as *Kalīla wa-Dimna*.

As in many other languages, there are some contradictory proverbs, which suggest that they were coined in different circumstances. For example:

arsil ḥakīman wa-awṣihi	Send a wiseman and give him instructions.
arsil ḥakīman wa-lā tūṣihi	Send a wiseman and don't give him instructions.
rubba kalimatin salabat niᶜma	Many a word has spoiled a favour.
rubba kalimatin afādat niᶜma'	Many a word has helped a favour.
fī al-iᶜāda ifāda	Repetition is beneficial.
at-tikrār li-l-ḥimār	Repetition is for donkeys.

Many proverbs denote a comparison between situations, objects, animals, persons or events. The most prolific are those based on the pattern "*afalu min...*" (more than...)[8]. That is to say, the person or the event is 'more than in comparison with'. For example, if we say about a person that he is "*aḥmaq min naᶜāma*" [more stupid than an ostrich (because it buries its head in the ground)], or "*aḥmaq min Habannaqa*" [more stupid than Habannaqa (who buried his money in the desert and chose a cloud over him as a landmark)], we in fact state that the subject of our comparison exceeds the person/animal/event/ situation or object in the characteristic or notion referred to by the comparative.

Comparison may however be expressed by using simple similes. For example: *ka-l-bāḥiṯ ᶜan ḥatfihi bi-ẓilfihi* (like someone who digs his own

[8] See above 2.4 type 3. e.

grave), or *miṯl an-naʿāma, lā ṭayr wa-lā ǧamal* (like ostrich, neither a bird nor a camel)[9].

A large number of proverbs begin with the words *ḫayr* (the best) or *šarr* (the worst). Those may also be used for comparison. For example: *ḫayr al-umūr awsāṭuhā* – the best way is modus vivendi; *ḫayru l-kalām mā qalla wa-dalla* – the best words are those which are pithy; *šarru š-šadāʾid mā yuḍḥiku* – the worst hardship is the one which is funny; *šarru ayyām ad-dīk yawma tuġsalu riǧlāhu* – the worst day of the cock is the day when his legs are washed.

Several proverbs are based on parallelism, that is to say the two clauses of which the proverb consists are parallel. Three main types may be distinguished:

– resultant (i.e. the second clause indicating the result of the facts stated in the first). E.g.: *ḏahaba l-ḥimār yaṭlubu qarnayn faʿāda maṣlūm al-uḏnayn* – the donkey went to get horns and came back without ears.

– Antithesis (i.e. the two clauses stand in contrast). E.g.: *aradnāhu ʿawnan fa-kāna firʿawna* – we expected from him to be helpful but he acted like Pharaoh.

– Chiasmus (i.e. the two clauses are nearly in complete 'reverse' order). E.g.: *kalb aš-šayḫ šayḫ al-kilāb* – the sheikh's dog is the dogs' sheikh. Or, *al-ḥurr ʿabd iḏā ṭamaʿa wa-l-ʿabd ḥurr iḏā qanaʿa* – the free man is a slave when he is ambitious and the slave is free when he is contented.

2.6 The use of Arabic proverbs

The fact that Arabic proverbs are one of the oldest genres of Arabic literature and that Arabic proverbs are used both orally and in writing demonstrates their popularity. It is also worth mentioning that most of the proverbs used orally are in colloquial Arabic, while those used in

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[9] Based on the folktale that the ostrich was asked to carry a load but she said she could not because she was a bird, but when she was asked to fly she said she could not either, because she was a camel. (See Freytag's collection (1838) and also Trench 1905:8).

writing are mainly in literary Arabic, though occasionally one may find that proverbs from the spoken stratum sometimes infiltrate modern Arabic literature and other written materials, and vice versa.

The colloquial proverbs are very rich and colourful. Nevertheless it was only in our century that serious collections began to appear, covering wide geographical areas. This does not mean that proverbs in the spoken vernacular had been ignored before. On the contrary, we may assume that many of the proverbs which appeared in the old collections and in short lists which have reached us, were originally in colloquial Arabic, and were 'translated' into *fuṣḥā* at a later satge. The existence of two versions, one in *fuṣḥā* and one in *ʿāmmiyya* may prove this, though one may regard the two versions as a result of a collateral development. For example, parallel with the *fuṣḥā* version *wāfaqa šann ṭabaqa* we have *ṭanǧara wa-lāqat ġiṭāhā* (they suit each other exactly); *mudd riǧlaka ʿalā qadr al-kisā'* – *ʿalā qadd bisāṭak mudd iǧrēik* (stretch your feet according to the length of the carpet); - *lil-ḥīṭān āḏān* – *il-ḥāyit lhā iḏān* – (walls have ears).

2.7 Conclusion

Arabic proverbs represent an ancient genre which has gained much popularity across history. The hundreds of collections, both in classical Arabic and in the various dialects, prove the wide circulation of proverbs, and their appearance in written materials as well as orally demonstrates their high status and the importance attached to them by Arabic speakers. Although it is usually impossible to establish the origin of most proverbs many proverbs and sayings can be traced back to Arabic literature, be related to a certain area or simply be loan translations from other languages. However, the coiner of the proverb is usually anonymous. With very few exceptions, all proverbs in Arabic are expressed by complete sentences, while their style is simple, picturesque and witty, reflecting long life experience and inherited wisdom.

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