

THE ORIGIN AND HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PRESENT-DAY ARABIC PROVERB

Societies bound by a rigid tradition of fixed moral and religious notions, and comprising a large percentage of illiterate persons, usually possess a great treasure of proverbs and popular sayings, particularly if they are endowed with a rich and flexible language. The Arabic-speaking countries of our time represent a most conspicuous example of such a society. Tens of thousands of modern Arabic proverbs have been collected by both European and Arab scholars in the countries of the Middle East and North Africa, and anyone acquainted with the facts will concede that the material is far from being exhausted.

A few illustrations may suffice: for the Western end of the Arab world, we have Mohammed Ben Cheneb's alphabetically arranged and richly annotated three volumes of "*Proverbes arabes de l'Algerie et du Maghreb*," (1905-1907), complemented by the eminent anthropologist E. Westermarck's "*Wit and Wisdom in Morocco, a Study of Native Proverbs*," (1930), which is divided according to subject matter and provided with a comprehensive introductory essay on the Arab proverb in general. There follow numerous studies by French, North African and other scholars concerned with local dialects, e. g. Brunot's "*Proverbes et Dictons arabes de Rabat*," (1928), or Ahmed Sabihi and A. Benchehida's edition of *Hitherto unpublished proverbs used by the old women of Morocco* (Fez, 1930); or the notes of Brunot-Malka on the *Colloquial of the Jews of Fez*, (1939, cf. pp. 184-194), or those of Marcel Cohen on *the Dialect of the Jews of Algiers* (1912). There exist Italian and other collections of the Tripolitan and Libyan proverbs. The countless publications on the Egyptian material, so notably inaugurated by Sharaf ad-Din's *Florilegium of early 18th Century proverbs*, published by J. L. Burckhardt (1817-1830) may all be superseded by Mme. Fa'iq H. F. Rafiq's huge *Hada'iq al-Amthal al-'Ammiya*, which, if completed, will comprise well over ten thousand proverbs. Egypt, since Fatimid times the most flourishing centre of Arabic culture, is especially rich in popular wisdom, to which fact, as Mme. Rafiq rightly observes, (Vol. II, 1943, pp. 5-6), the Egyptian natural inclination to fun and jesting may also have contributed.

Arab Asia is well represented by the Bethlehem clergyman 'Abbud's

"5,000 Proverbs," (1933), to which Mr. M. Thilo has contributed a detailed Index of subject matter, (1937), which is a valuable guide for research into the modern Arabic proverb in general. Of the many publications on Syria and the Lebanon, the late Mgr. Michel Feghali's learned "*Proverbes et Dictons syro-libanais*," (Paris, 1938), may be cited, while for Iraq, so far as I know, many smaller works have been published partly by archaeologists and foreigners visiting the country, and partly by local savants, as Talaqani's "*Amthal Baghdadiya*," edited by Massignon, but no comprehensive collection has yet appeared. Such a collection is at present being prepared for me by a particularly gifted young Baghdadi, who carefully registers the differences between Muslim, Jewish and Christian usage, noted many years ago by Anastase al-Karmali the well-known Arab linguist. Special mention should be made of "*Proverbia Arabica*" by I. B. Yahuda (1932, 1934; a third posthumous volume is to appear soon). Yahuda was the scion of an old Jewish family of Baghdad, who lived in Cairo and afterwards in Jerusalem: as a dealer in Arabic books, he had connections all over the Arab world. His fine and richly annotated collection, despite some shortcomings and although written in Hebrew, should not be neglected by any student of the contemporary Arabic proverb.

For Arabia itself, we have the brief, but interesting, *Study of Meccan proverbs* by the great Dutch scholar Snouck Hurgronje (1886), and Abdulla Yacoob Khan's "*Dictionary of Aden Proverbs*"; much material may, in addition, be found in travel books or in linguistic studies on Arabia. The collection of proverbs of Central Yemen, published by the present writer in 1934 under the title of "*Jemenica*", comprises 1,432 items, but is only a selection from a much greater stock, complemented and enriched by subsequent research.

Where does this immense material come from, and what does it teach us concerning the history of the peoples using it? It would, of course, be futile to attempt to reach an exact answer to these questions. "Never try to find the original of a popular literary composition, for such a thing does not exist," says Professor Marcel Mauss in his excellent "*Manuel d'Ethnographie*," (Paris, 1947, p. 98). If this is true of the original of popular literary creations, it certainly applies to proverbs, which by their very nature express some general human experience, usually not confined to any particular place or class, and are therefore prone to migrate from one country to another. However, the modern Arabic proverb possesses certain characteristics, presently to be specified, which render investigation into its origins a not unfruitful enterprise, and even a desideratum for both philological and historical research.

First, despite the great differences in the stocks of proverbs peculiar to the various Arab countries, localities or sections of population, there remains a considerable *common core* found almost all over the Arab world, from Morocco to Oman or Mosul. It is extremely difficult to appraise the percentage of these common Arabic proverbs to be found in the

various local vernaculars, for most of the existing collections try to give the material of a whole country. They are therefore far too comprehensive for exact ethnological research, which prefers to confine itself to locally and socially limited groups,—the sole procedure for determining which proverbs are actually used in any given community; there is of course some difference in this respect between townspeople and the inhabitants of remote villages or Beduins. Still, it would not be far from the truth if one stated that approximately one third of modern Arabic proverbs so far recorded are common to the greater part of the Arab world, and that a sizable proportion of these might be found also in Turkish and Persian, and most probably also in the usage of other Muslim peoples. To be sure, it must be borne in mind that the Arabic vernaculars differ from each other almost as greatly as separate languages, so that proverbs sounding very different in wording may in reality be exactly identical. To prove this, there is no need to dwell on commonplaces such as “He who seeks, finds,” already current in Hebrew and Latin (*qui quaerit, invenit*), and whose classical forms *من جد وجد* Hadith, or

من طلب جلب (Hariri, *Maqamat*, 9) are rendered in about ten different rhymes in the various dialects, as “*man shigi ligi*” *من شقى لقى* in Yemen (*Jemenica*, 1194), or *لوش تروش* in Upper Egypt (*Hada'iq al Amthal* 2465, with two other variants), or “When the thieves quarrel, the theft comes out,” for which ‘Abbud (154) has *اذا تقاتلوا اللصوص ظهر المروق* which is very near to the literary form quoted by *Maidani*, p. 91, but very different in wording from the identical Yemenite version:

The same is true of proverbs containing quite unusual notions and having particular forms of expression, such as

min saburoh tulla loh (*Jemenica*, 1196)

min dihnu isginu (Baghd., Yahuda, *Proverbia*, 1273)

which both mean “Smear him with his own fat,” or

man ubsar dar al-Malik, hajam daimatoh (*Jemenica*, 1156)

illi yashuf qasr is-siltan yakharrib kukhu (Baghd., Yahuda 1182)

(He who has seen the Sultan's palace, destroys his own hut).

The Arabic original of this proverb, which seems to be very old, since the Persian poet Jalal-ud-Din Rumi (*Diwan-i-Shems-i-Tabriz*), p. 57 alludes to it, has, in Yemen and in Baghdad, *not a single word in common*, differing even in grammatical construction: in Yemen, *ubsar hajam*, (preterite, as in classical Arabic), in Baghdad, *yishuf, yikharrib* (imperfect). The English translation of both versions, however, is absolutely identical.

This fact of the existence of a vast number of proverbs common to

most of the Arab countries invites an investigation of their origins, particularly if one bears in mind that this common stock is characteristically different from the proverbs of other civilizations, including the European, with which Arab civilization shares a heavy indebtedness to the Jewish and Christian as well as to the Graeco-Roman heritage, and with which it has been connected through political and cultural relations for many centuries. The late Professor D. S. Margoliouth stressed this fact in his review *Jemenica* in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1935, pp. 405-6, and one has only to compare any one of the above-mentioned collections with the *Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs* by W. G. Smith and I. E. Heseltine, 1935, to become fully aware of it. Moreover, the degree of difference of a people geographically and linguistically as near to Arabia as the Abyssinians is very marked as well. In a recent publication of Gurague proverbs included in a volume on that language by Dr. W. Leslau, (Viking Foundation, 1950), I found not a single item actually corresponding to those in circulation on the other shore of the Red Sea.

Finally, the Arabic proverb lends itself easily to an historical approach, because it has been extensively recorded for the last 1,400 years. Pro-Islamic as well as Muslim poets often make allusion to proverbial sayings, and like the early Greek Gnomographs, there were poets who specialized in rendering proverbs into verse, for which the Bab al-Adab wa-l-Hikma in Abu Tammam's *Hamasa* and similar anthologies may be consulted. I. Goldziher has shown (*Muh. Stud.*, vol. 11, p. 204 ff.) that the Arabs had begun to write down *hikam* in special *majallas* even before Islam, and that there existed collections of aphorisms of famous rulers or chieftains, the last instance being one of al-Mansur, the second Abbasid Caliph, which was still widely circulated at the time of al-Jahiz. Side by side with study of the language, the poetry, the history and the genealogy of the ancient Arabs, the Muslim scholars collected their proverbs, a task almost completed in the 4th century of the Hijra by the works of Hamzah al-Isfahani or of al-Hasan al-Askari; the comprehensive collection of al-Maidani¹ (d. 518/1124), now almost a classic of Arabic literature, is but a later compilation² of great importance for an historical investigation of the Arab proverb is the registration of its actual occurrence in the old records of Arabic history and literature. The great Dutch scholar de Goeje has made lists of the proverbs occurring in at-Tabari's *History of the Prophets and Kings*, the *Kitab al-Aghani* and other classical texts. His praiseworthy example has been followed by European scholars, e. g. the editor of al-Mubarrid's *Kamil*, and by some fine modern Egyptian editions, e. g. that of Ibn Qutaiba's *Uyun al-Akhbar*. Particularly rich in proverbial sayings,—of a different type, to be sure, from those recorded in the early historical works—, is religious, especially *Sufic*, literature; these, if I am not mistaken, have, however, not yet been listed in

1. I quote the Egyptian edition of 1352 A. H., and shall refer only in special cases to Freytag's Latin edition.

2. Mez, *Die Renaissance des Islam*, p. 228.