

On the Study of Popular Sayings

Ethnology

PROF. EDWARD WESTERMARCK, in the *Frazer Lecture in Social Anthropology*, before the British Association for the Advancement of Science:

It has been said to be a difficult or hopeless task to try to discover why people perform rites and ceremonies, that directly one approaches the underlying meaning of rite or custom one meets only with uncertainty and vagueness. I cannot say that this view is confirmed by my own observations in Morocco, where I generally found the natives to have quite definite ideas about their rites. But the direct inquiry into these ideas is not the only way in which they may be ascertained. The most convincing information is often obtained, not from what the natives say *about* their rites, but from what they say at the moment when they perform them. To take a few instances. That the fire-ceremonies practised in Morocco, as in Europe, on Midsummer Day or on some other particular day of the year, are purificatory in intention is obvious from the words which people utter when they leap over them or take their animals over the ashes. The Moorish methods of covenanting, which always imply some kind of bodily contact, for example, by the partaking of a common meal, derive their force from the idea that both parties thereby expose themselves to each other's conditional curses; and the idea that food eaten in common embodies such a curse is very clearly expressed in the imprecation addressed to a faithless participant. These customs, and the sayings connected with them, have led me to believe that the very similar methods—such as a sacrificial meal—used by the ancient Hebrews in their covenanting with the Deity were intended, not, as has been supposed, to establish communion, but to transfer conditional curses both to the men and their god. That one idea underlying the Moorish custom of tying rags or clothing to some object connected with a dead saint is to tie up the saint, and to keep him tied until he renders the assistance asked for, is directly proved by words said on such occasions. This has suggested to me that some similar idea may perhaps be at the root of the Latin word for religion, *religio*, if, as has been conjectured, this word is related to the verb *religare*, "to tie." It might have implied, not that

man was tied by his god, but that the god was in the religious ritual tied by the man.

While a saying uttered on the occasion when a rite is performed is apt to throw light on the meaning of the rite, there are other sayings that can themselves be explained only by the circumstances in which they are used. This is the case with a large number of proverbs. It has been said that the chief ingredients which go to make a proverb are "sense, shortness, and salt," but the most essential characteristic of all is popularity, acceptance and adoption on the part of the people. Figurativeness is a frequent quality, but there are also many sayings recognized as proverbs that contain no figure of speech. On the other hand, there is hardly a proverb that does not in its form, somehow or other, differ from ordinary speech. Rhythm, rhyme, and alliteration are prominent features. . . .

Not infrequently some of the proverbs of a people contradict the teaching of others. Such incongruities may be more apparent than real. Proverbs may have the form of categorical imperatives on account of their necessary brevity, and in such cases their one-sidedness has to be corrected by others dealing with particular circumstances that modify the general rule. Moreover, as people are not all alike one maxim may appeal to one person and another different maxim to another. And there is, further, the distinction between proverbs that represent ideals and others that are based on realities which do not come up to these ideals. But it must not be assumed that a people's proverbs on a certain topic always tell us the whole truth about their feelings relating to it. The Moorish sayings concerning women and married life may serve as a warning. They are uniformly unfriendly or thoroughly prudential, and might easily make one believe that the men are utterly devoid of tender feelings towards their wives. But here we have to take into account their ideas of decency. It is considered indecent of a man to show any affection for his wife; in the eyes of the outside world he should treat her with the greatest indifference.

Proverbs are not merely reflections of life but play an active part in it; and this functional aspect of the

matter should also engage the attention of the student. Proverbs teach resignation in adversity, they give counsels and warnings, they are means of influencing the emotions, will, and behavior of others, as they may influence one's own, whether they are shaped as direct commands, or as statements of some experience drawn from life, or are expressions of approval or admiration or of disapproval or contempt. The exceedingly frequent use of proverbs in Morocco, as in other countries with a Semitic culture, bears testimony to their great social adaptability. The proverb is a spice by which anybody may add piquancy to his speech, it shortens a discussion, it provides a neat argument which has the authority of custom and tradition, it is a dignified way of confessing an error or offering an apology, it makes a reproof less offensive by making it less personal. One reason for the great popularity that proverbs enjoy among the Moors is their desire to be polite; thus a proverb is often an excellent substitute for a direct refusal, which might seem inappropriate or rude. It also stops a quarrel and makes those who were cursing each other a moment before shake hands and smile. . . .

When we are sure of the intrinsic meaning of proverbs, and only then, we can find a reasonable solution of a problem that has proved a constant stumbling block to collectors and compilers, namely, their classification. If proverbs are to be treated as a source of information for the sociological or psychological study of a people they cannot, as has usually been the case, be arranged simply in alphabetical order by the first letters of the first word. They must be grouped according to the subjects or situations on which they have a bearing, and be accompanied with all explanations necessary for the right understanding of their import and implications. Proverbs that are applicable in different situations may have to be repeated under different headings; but to judge by my own experience such repetitions need not be very many.

If due attention is bestowed upon the collection of proverbs, we may hope that the scientific study of them will better than hitherto keep pace with the progress made within other branches of folk-lore.

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