14. Proverbs

The significance and concept of the proverb. Form and style. Content. Occasions and functions. Specific examples: Jabo; Zulu; Azande. Conclusion.

I

Proverbs seem to occur almost everywhere in Africa, in apparent contrast with other areas of the world such as aboriginal America and Polynesia. Relatively easy to record, they have been exceedingly popular with collectors. Particularly well represented are proverbs from the Bantu area (especially the Southern Bantu); the Congo and West Africa have also provided many extensive collections. It is notable, however, that there are apparently few or no proverbs among the Bushmen of southern Africa and the Nilotic peoples (Doke 1933: 6; Evans-Pritchard 1963*b*: 109), and few seem to have been recorded in Nilo-Hamitic languages. In other areas proverbs seem universal and in some African languages occur in rich profusion. 4,000 have been published in Rundi, for instance, about 3,000 in Nkundo, and roughly 2,000 in Luba and Hausa. In addition Bascom lists about thirty other African peoples for whom 500 or more proverbs have been recorded (Bascom 1964: 16–17; Doke 1947: 115–7; Whitting 1940). Also many editors say that they doubt whether their collections are complete.

The literary relevance of these short sayings is clear. Proverbs are a rich source of imagery and succinct expression on which more elaborate forms can draw. As Nketia puts it in his comment on Ghanaian proverbs

> The value of the proverb to us in modern Ghana does not lie only in what it reveals of the thoughts of the past. For the poet today or indeed for the speaker who is some sort of an artist in the use of words, the proverb is a model of compressed or forceful language. In addition to drawing on it for

> its words of wisdom, therefore, he takes interest in its verbal techniques—its selection of words, its use of comparison as a method of statement, and so on. Familiarity with its techniques enables him to create, as it were, his own proverbs. This enables him to avoid hackneyed expressions and give a certain amount of freshness to his speech.
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> This . . . approach to proverbs which is evident in the speech of people who are regarded as accomplished speakers or poets of a sort makes the proverbs not only a body of short statements built up over the years and which reflect the thought and insight of Ghanaians into problems of life, but also a technique of verbal expression, which is greatly appreciated by the Ghanaian. It is no wonder therefore that the use of proverbs has continued to be a living tradition in Ghana (Nketia 1958: 21)

In many African cultures a feeling for language, for imagery, and for the expression of abstract ideas through compressed and allusive phraseology comes out particularly clearly in proverbs. The figurative quality of proverbs is especially striking; one of their most noticeable characteristics is their allusive wording, usually in metaphorical form. This also emerges in many of the native words translated as 'proverb' and in the general stress often laid on the significance of speaking in symbolic terms. Indeed, this type of figurative expression is sometimes taken so far as to be almost a whole mode of speech in its own right. The Fulani term *mallol* for instance, means not only a proverb but also allusion in general, and is especially used when there is some deep hidden meaning in a proverb different from the obvious one' (Gaden 1931: vi). Similarly with the Kamba term *ndimo*. This does not exactly correspond to our term 'proverb' but is its nearest equivalent, and really means a 'dark saying' or 'metaphorical wording', a sort of secret and allusive language (Lindblom iii, 1934: 28).

The literary significance of proverbs in Africa is also brought out by their close connection with other forms of oral literature. This is sometimes apparent in the local terminology, for proverbs are not always distinguished by a special term from other categories of verbal art. The Nyanja *mwambi*, for instance, refers to story, riddle, or proverb, the Ganda *olugero* means, among other things, a saying, a story, a proverb, and a parable (Doke 1947: 102) and the Mongo *bokolo* is used of all poetic expression including fable, proverb, poetry and allegory (Hulstaert 1958: 6). This overlap in terms is fairly common in Bantu languages and also sometimes occurs in West Africa too: the Limba *mboro* refers to story, riddle, and parable as well as to sayings which we might term proverbs, while the Fulani *tindol* can mean not only a popular moral story but also a proverb or maxim (Gaden 1931: vi).

In some languages (such as Yoruba or Zulu) a distinction does exist in terminology between proverbs and other types of literary expression.[1] But even here there is often a practical connection between proverbs and other forms of oral literature. Chatelain pointed out that Kimbundu proverbs are closely related to anecdotes, so much so that anecdotes are sometimes just illustrations of a proverb, while a proverb is frequently an anecdote in a nutshell (Chatelain 1894: 21). Again, the Nyanja proverb 'Pity killed the francolin' is a direct allusion to the story in which the francolin came to the help of a python and was in return eaten by it (Gray 1944: 102). Similar connections between story and proverb are mentioned for the Azande, Zulu, Ashanti, and many others, and a moralizing story may end with, or imply, a proverb to drive home its point. As well, proverbs frequently appear in songs and poems. The drum proverbs of Ghana or Dahomey are particularly striking examples here. Among other instances we could mention the Nguni saying 'The earth does not get fat' (i.e. however many dead it receives the earth is never satiated) which also appears as the central theme and chorus in an impressive Ngoni lament (in Ch. 7 above) and the Swahili poem about silence based on the proverb 'Much silence has a mighty noise' ('Still waters run deep') but elaborated and drawn out in the verses arising from it (Taylor 1891: 32–3). Written forms too sometimes make use of traditional proverbs, as in Muyaka's Swahili poems, and these in turn may give further currency to new or old proverbs (Doke 1947: 105). Proverbs are also sometimes connected with riddles (e.g. the Anang 'proverb-riddles' discussed below, p. 431) or, as among the Liberian Jabo, with praise names (Herzog 1936: 12). They also frequently occur in general conversation and in oratory to embellish, conceal, or hint. Proverbs, in short, are closely interwoven with other aspects of linguistic and literary behaviour.

As well as these obvious and common ways in which proverbs overlap with other kinds of verbal art, they also appear in certain specialized forms. Their use in the form of 'proverb names' is one. Among the Ovimbundu, to give one example, the woman's name *Simbovala* is a shortened form of the proverb 'While you mark out a field, Death marks you out in life'—in life you are in the midst of death' (Ennis 1945: 3; on names in general see Ch. 16). Another connection is with bird lore, a form particularly popular among the Southern Bantu. The cries attributed to certain birds can be expressed

1 There are also several cases where there are both a general term, covering both proverbs and other types of verbal art, and, in addition, a more precise term referring to proverbs only.

as a proverb or a song. The hammerkop, for instance, can be referred to as a symbol of vanity either in a brief proverb or in the full song in which he is represented as praising himself at length (Meeussen 1959: 73); the songs here are thus inextricably linked with the proverbs. Proverbs are also sometimes connected with other artistic media: they can be drummed (a characteristic form in some West African societies), sung, as with Lega judicial proverbs, or can appear on the flags of military companies, as among the Fante (Christensen 1958: 240). Most striking of all is the way the Ashanti associate a certain proverb with one or other of their many 'gold-weights'—small brass figures and images originally used to weigh gold dust and worked with great skill and humour. Thus a snake catching a bird represents the proverb 'The snake lies upon the ground, but God has given him the hornbill' (that flies in the sky). Another weight depicts two crocodiles with only a single stomach between them, representing 'Bellies mixed up, crocodiles mixed up, we have between us only one belly, but if we get anything to eat it passes down our respective gullets'—a famous proverb often cited when one individual in a family tries to seize for himself rather than sharing (Rattray 1923: 312–3; also Paulme 1941; Plass 1967).

Certain of the direct associations between proverbs and other artistic forms such as metalwork or drumming may be peculiar to certain African societies, but the general association of proverbs and other forms of literature is not after all very surprising. These close connections are perhaps particularly characteristic of an *oral* literature without a clear-cut distinction between written and unwritten forms, but the sort of way in which proverbial expression and other types of literary art (including the art of conversation) mutually enrich and act upon each other is something that is presumably a quality of most cultures. In this sense, then, proverbs in Africa are not so very different from those in any literate culture, in both of which their main impact seems, in fact, to be in an *oral* rather than a written form. In neither case should they be regarded as isolated sayings to be collected in hundreds or thousands on their own, but rather as just one aspect of artistic expression within a whole social and literary context.

The close connection of proverbs with other literary forms raises a difficulty. How, particularly in an oral culture, can we distinguish proverbs from other forms of oral art? or indeed, from ordinary clichés and idioms, and from such related but different forms as maxims and apophthegms?

Most of the published collections ignore this point of definition and by merely entitling their works 'Proverbs' often give the misleading impression

that these sayings are clearly differentiated from other expressions or that they are in all ways equivalent to our idea of proverbs. Some of the best collections, such as those of Hulstaert, Nyembezi, Doke, or Chatelain, specifically point out this difficulty, but most have little or no discussion of this point.

The exact definition of 'proverb' is no easy matter. There is, however, some general agreement as to what constitutes a proverb. It is a saying in more or less fixed form marked by 'shortness, sense, and salt' and distinguished by the popular acceptance of the truth tersely expressed in it. Even so general a picture as this contains some useful pointers for the analysis of African proverbs.

First, their form. They are picked out first and most obviously as being short; and secondly by the fact that even where the wording itself is not absolutely fixed, at least the main structural pattern is accepted in the society concerned as an appropriate one for this purpose. This question of form has been well noted by collectors and is pursued further in the following section. It will emerge that, in addition to terseness and relative fixity, most sayings classed as proverbs are also marked by some kind of poetic quality in style or sense, and are in this way set apart in form from more straightforward maxims.

The question of 'popular acceptance' is, however, a more difficult one. If one of the marks of a true proverb is its general acceptance as the popular expression of some truth, we are seldom given the data to decide how far this is indeed a characteristic of the sayings included in collections of 'proverbs'. In many cases presumably the sayings included are proverbs in this full sense. But we have in fact no way of telling whether some of the 'proverbs' included are not just the sententious utterances of a single individual on a single occasion, which happened to appeal to the investigator.

The sort of terminology involved can sometimes provide a clue to the local attitude to 'proverbs'. As we have seen, there is sometimes a specialized term, sometimes not. This is not always made clear by collectors. Even more serious is the frequent failure to consider when, how, and by or among whom common proverbs are used.[2] Even where something about the general context is given we are practically never told in detail how a given single proverb was actually used (for some exceptions see below). Yet, as will emerge, this may in fact determine its significance, the way in which it is appreciated locally, even its meaning. This aspect is often crucial,

2 A point well made in Arewa and Dundes 1964; see also Evans-Pritchard 1963a.

if whether or not some attractive saying is really a 'proverb' depends on the local evaluation of it. This question is made more difficult because proverbs often have no specialized occasions for their use. Unlike such forms as riddles and stories they are not normally set apart as suitable for relaxation after, say, the end of the day's work, but are closely involved with speech and action on every sort of occasion (including general conversation). Therefore to differentiate those sayings which are merely idiomatic from those that *the people concerned* consider to have that special flavour which makes it correct to call them proverbs, we need more precise information about context and attitude than we are usually given.

This said, we can in a general way accept most of the published sayings as falling, more or less, within the general category of proverb. But it is worth making these points about the difficulties inherent in differentiating proverbs if it helps to deter yet more facile collections and to encourage more consideration of their context. In the case of proverbs above all, an understanding of this is essential.

II

In discussing the style and structure of African proverbs one of the first things one notices is the poetic form in which many are expressed. This, allied to their figurative mode of expression, serves to some degree to set them apart from everyday speech. This point often does not emerge in collections of translated examples. A more detailed discussion of form in African proverbs is therefore needed here to show these two characteristics more clearly.

The general truth touched on in a proverb can be conveyed in several ways: more or less literally, through a simile, or (most commonly) through a metaphor.

The relatively literal forms of proverbs often contain some allusion or a picturesque form of speech, and among certain peoples at least are marked by some poetic quality such as rhythm. Examples of this type are fairly common. 'The dying of the heart is a thing unshared', 'If the chief speaks, the people make silent their ears', and the humorous description of a drunkard, 'He devoured the Kaffir-beer and it devoured him', are instances from South Africa (McLaren 1917: 343; 338; 341). Comments on what is considered to be the real nature of people or things often occur in this form, as in the Thonga 'The White man has no kin. His kin is money', the Xhosa description of Europeans as 'The people who rescue and kill' (i.e.

they protect with one hand, destroy with the other) (Junod 1938: 49; Theal 1886: 199), or the witty Akan comment that 'An ancient name cannot be cooked and eaten; after all, money is the thing' (Rattray 1916: 118). General advice is also often tendered in this sort of form, as in the Thonga 'Dis du mal du chef quand tu quittes son pays' or the humorous Ila injunction to hospitality in the form of 'The rump of a visitor is made to sit upon' (Junod: 1931, no. 56; Smith and Dale ii, 1920: 312). It is true that several of these (and similar) proverbs may also conceal deeper meanings as well as picturesque language, but in explicit form, in contrast to the clearly figurative, they present the thought in a simple and straightforward way.[3]

More often the proverbs are figurative in one way or another. Direct similes occur fairly often. The Hausa, for example, say that 'A chief is like a dust-heap where everyone comes with his rubbish (complaint) and deposits it' (Tremearne 1913: 62). Among the Southern Bantu the likening of something to dew melting away in the sun appears in many forms: the Zulu suggest that something is only a passing phase by asserting that 'This thing is like the dew which showers down', and the comparison often appears in a more direct and concise form, as with the Thonga 'Wealth is dew' or Ndebele 'Kingship is dew' (Stuart and Malcolm 1949: 70; Junod 1938: 49; Leaver and Nyembezi 1946: 137). Wealth is another stock comparison, as in the Swahili 'Wits (are) wealth', or the vivid saying of the Thonga and others that 'To bear children is wealth, to dress oneself is (nothing but) colours' (Taylor 1891: 2; Junod and Jaques 1936, no. 450). Many other examples of these direct comparisons could be cited: the Southern Bantu 'To look at a man as at a snake' (i.e. with deadly hatred), or 'To marry is to put a snake in one's handbag'; (McLaren 1917: 336; Junod 1938: 50) the Ashanti proverbs 'Family names are like flowers, they blossom in clusters' or 'A wife is like a blanket; when you cover yourself with it, it irritates you, and yet if you cast it aside you feel cold'; (Rattray 1916: 125, 139) and the Xhosa 'He is ripe inside, like a water-melon', describing a man who has come to a resolution without yet expressing it publicly (one cannot tell if a water-melon is ripe from the outside) (Theal 1886: 194).

Most frequent of all, however, and the most adaptable are the proverbs where comparison is evoked metaphorically. In this form proverbs about

3 In these straightforward forms the veiling or allusiveness characteristic of so much proverbial expression is sometimes in fact achieved by devices other than direct imagery. Abbreviation is one common way (e.g. in the Ovimbundu proverb-names); another is to express the proverb in some medium other than verbal utterance, with drums, for instance, or through gold-weights (Ashanti).

animals and birds are very common indeed (perhaps particularly in the Bantu areas); here, as in the tales about animals and in certain praise names, a comment is often being made about human life and action through reference to non-human activity. Egotism, for instance, is commented on and satirized in the Sotho '"I and my rhinoceros" said the tick bird' or the Ndau 'The worm in the cattle kraal says "I am an ox"', and among the Ila it is said of squanderers 'The prodigal cow threw away her own tail.[4] Similarly, generalizations about animal imply a comment on human affairs. Thus the Thonga 'The strength of the crocodile is in the water' (Junod 1938: 47) can comment in various ways, implying from one point of view that a man is strong when his kinsmen help him, from another that a man should stick to his own place and not interfere with others. The importance of self-help is stressed in 'No fly catches for another' (McLaren 1917: 340), while the Zulu generalization 'No polecat ever smelt its own stink' alludes picturesquely to man's blindness and self-satisfaction (Mayr 1912: 958).

Though proverbs about animals are particularly common, generalizations about other everyday things are also used to suggest some related idea about people. The Zulu observe that man is able to manage his own affairs through the metaphor that 'There is no grinding stone that got the better of the miller', and the Ndebele remind one that 'The maker of a song does not spoil it' when wishing to warn that it is not right to interfere with someone who understands his own business (Stuart and Malcolm 1949: 17; Jones 1925: 66). The Lamba 'Metal that is already welded together, how can one unweld it?' can be used in the same sort of way as our 'Don't cry over spilt milk', while the Thonga 'The nape of the neck does not see' alludes to the way people get out of control when the master of the village is away (Doke 1934: 361; Junod and Jaques 1936: no. 352). Perhaps even more common than the metaphorical generalization is the form in which a general or abstract idea is conveyed not through any direct generalization at all but through a single concrete situation which provides only one example of the general point. Thus the Thonga 'The one who says "Elephant die! I want to eat! I am on the way"' alludes to the way in which some people are over-impatient instead of taking the time to do the job properly, while a different point of view is suggested in the specific Hausa statement that 'The man with deepest eyes can't see the moon till it is fifteen days old'—in other words is so narrowly concentrated that the obvious escapes him (Junod and Jaques 1936, no. 2; Whitting 1940: p. 3).

4 McLaren 1917, p. 334; Smith and Dale ii, 1920, p. 316.

The Zulu express the general idea that people reap the fruit of their own folly by mentioning specific situations: 'He ate food and it killed him' and 'The won't-be-told man sees by the bloodstain' (Ripp 1930; Dunning 1946). The frequent effects of over-confidence and officious advice are alluded to in the pointed Nyanja saying 'Mr. Had-it-been-I caused the baboons belonging to someone else to escape', while they comment on fools from the specific case of 'Mr. Didn't-know' who 'took shelter from the rain in the pond' (Gray 1944: 112; 117). Fools are similarly alluded to in the Ewe 'If a boy says he wants to tie water with a string, ask him if he means the water in the pot or the water in the lagoon' (Ellis 1890: 260). This hinting at a general or abstract idea through one concrete case, either direct or itself metaphorical, is a common proverbial form throughout the continent.

Hyperbole and exaggeration are also frequent motifs, often in addition to some of the forms mentioned above. Many instances could be cited, among them the common Bantu saying that 'If you are patient, you will see the eyes of the snail', or 'The monitor has gone dry', which alludes to the fact that even the monitor, famed for I (Werner 1906: 212; McLaren 1917: 335). There is the Fulani proverb 'You will not see an elephant moving on your own head, only the louse moving on another's'; and the Zulu description of an unblushing and flagrant liar, 'He milks also the cows heavy with calf—he would actually go as far as saying he could milk cows *before* they had calved (Whitting 1940: 160; Nyembezi 1954: 40). Paradox is also occasionally used with the same kind of effect, as in the Hausa comment on the effects of idleness ('The want of work to do makes a man get up early to salute his enemy'), or the cynical Ila remark 'He has the kindness of a witch' (Whitting 1940: 121; Smith and Dale ii, 1920: 323). The quality of being far-fetched and humorous is used for similar effect in the Zulu reference to impossibility 'A goat may beget an ox and a white man sew on a [native] head ring', the Yoruba 'He who waits to see a crab wink will tarry long upon the shore', the Nyanja 'Little by little the tortoise arrived at the Indian Ocean', or the exaggerated Yoruba equivalent of our idea that one reaps as one sows—'One who excretes on the road, will find flies when he returns' (Stuhardt 1930: 69; Ellis 1894: 237; Gray 1944: 110; Gbadamosi and Beier 1959: 60).

The allusions of proverbs in the various collections are often not obvious. This is frequently due to our ignorance of the culture, particularly with proverbs that allude to some well-known story or famous individual. A knowledge of the situations in which proverbs are cited may also be an essential part of understanding their implications, and this is complicated

further by the fact that the same proverb may often be used, according to the context, to suggest a variety of different truths, or different facets of the same truth, or even its opposite. Some proverbs, furthermore, are obscure even to local individuals or groups. We cannot, then, expect African proverbs to be crystal-clear or to be able to grasp in each case the modes through which they figuratively or picturesquely suggest certain truths. However, it does seem that the main ways in which these are expressed are the ones already mentioned: by a straight, relatively literal statement; by similes; by various types of metaphor (often comparisons with animals or with one particular case suggesting a generalization); and by hyperbole and paradox.

Having considered some of the general forms in which proverbs appear we can now look at the detailed stylistic devices which these mainly figurative sayings employ to make their points effectively. Unlike stories and songs, the *performance* does not generally seem to be of importance. Rather, proverbs rely for their effect on the aptness with which they are used in a particular situation and—the point considered here—on the style and form of words in which they appear.[5]

Proverbs are generally marked by terseness of expression, by a form different from that of ordinary speech, and by a figurative mode of expression abounding in metaphor. The first two characteristics can be treated together here with illustrations from the Bantu group of languages. There are no *general* rules for the formation of Bantu proverbs and particular peoples have their own favourite forms, but certain common patterns are apparent. Pithiness and economy are always noticeable in proverbs, but in the Bantu languages this can be achieved particularly effectively through the system of concord. The subject noun, for example, can be omitted as in 'It is worked while still fresh' (i.e. 'Make hay while the sun shines'), where the concord makes clear that 'it' refers to 'clay' (Doke 1947: 106). Economy of wording is also often achieved through elision: not only are whole words left out (often for the sake of rhythm) but vowels are frequently elided, especially the final vowel of a word (Nyembezi 1954: 13). The terse expression grammatically possible in Bantu can be illustrated from a Tswana proverb, 'Young birds will always open their mouths, even to those who come to kill them', which in the original is only three words (Werner 1917: 184). Furthermore, proverbs are often quoted in abbreviated forms; in Bantu languages these are almost always preferred to more drawn-out forms (Doke 1959: 150).

5 On form and style the best discussion is that by Doke (1947) on Bantu proverbs, and his account is followed closely here.

The actual wording may take the form of a simple positive or negative proposition, as in the Swahili 'The goat-eater pays a cow' (i.e. sow the wind and reap the whirlwind), or the Zulu 'He has no chest' (he can't keep secrets), or of various types of simple rhythmic balanced propositions (e.g. the Lamba *munganda yacitala, ubwalwa wulasasa*, 'In the house of wrangling, beer becomes bitter', where there is exact balance in the two parts, each with three followed by four syllables). Double propositions in which the second portion is explanatory are also common, as in the Lamba 'A male is a millipede, he is not driven away with one driving (only)' (a man does not take a single refusal from a girl). Negative axioms also occur and are a particularly popular form in Xhosa and Zulu: 'There is no elephant burdened with its own trunk' (a comparison which occurs widely with various connotations, among them the idea that a mother does not feel her baby's weight), 'There is no partridge (that) scratches for another' (everyone for himself), 'There is no sun (which) sets without its affairs' (every day has its own troubles). Contrast propositions are a particularly striking and economical form and may be presented in either of two ways: by a direct parallel between the two portions of the proverb, as in the Lamba 'The body went, the heart did not go' (*umuwili waya, umutima tawile*), or by cross parallelism (chiasmus), as in the Lamba proverb 'One morsel of food does not break a company, what breaks a company is the mouth' (*akalyo kamo takotowa—citenje, icitowe citenje kanwa*). Another common form is reduplication, with repeated words or syllables. This usually comes at the beginning, as in the Swahili 'Hurry, hurry, has no blessing' (*haraka, haraka, haina bar oka*) or the Ganda 'Splutter, splutter isn't fire' (*bugu-bugu simuliro*) (examples from Doke 1947: 106–10).

Among the Bantu, as elsewhere, the use of quoted words attributed to some actual or fictional person is another device for giving point and sometimes authority to a proverbial saying, the form sometimes known as 'wellerism'.[6] This may be humorous as with the Ganda '"I'll die for a big thing", says the biting ant on the big toe' (Doke 1947: 110), but is usually more serious. There are also miscellaneous patterns of fairly frequent occurrence such as the widespread 'If . . . then . . .' formula, the proverbs opening with 'It is better', particularly popular among the Thonga, the frequent Lamba form 'As for you . . .', the Zulu negative axioms opening 'There is no . . .' or 'There is not . . .', the Nyanja use of special diminutive prefixes (*ka-* and *ti*) (Gray 1944: 102), and the 'slang'

6 For some non-Bantu 'wellerisms' see Dundes 1964.

form in Tumbuka-Kamanga proverbs of *cha-*, referring to the typical behaviour of some animal or thing (Young 1931: 266). Another form that occurs occasionally is the rhetorical question, as in the Karanga 'The swallower of old cows, is he choked with the bone of a calf?' (a chief who settles big cases is not likely to be overcome by a small one) (Bisset 1933). Although not mentioned by Doke, a further formal element in the proverbs of certain peoples is that of tones (e.g. in Luba proverbs (Von Avermaet 1959: 3ff.) and rhyme, in parts of East Africa.[7]

The wording of Bantu proverbs seems to be relatively fixed in outline so that these general patterns are maintained, or recalled, in their various citations. Minor variations, however, not infrequently occur. A proverb may appear in the singular or plural, with various verb tenses, or in the first, second, or third persons.[8] The forms also sometimes vary from place to place. Two sets of Ndebele proverbs, for instance, collected about a hundred miles from each other, differed slightly in form though they were clearly the 'same' proverbs (Benzies and Jackson 1924; Taylor and Jones 1925) and over wider areas there may be similar variations due to differences in dialect (Hulstaert 1958: 8). As mentioned already there are sometimes two forms, the full and the abbreviated, the second being the one normally cited. Sometimes the saying is cut down even further and merely referred to in one word, a phenomenon particularly common in one-word personal names. Thus among the Ovimbundu a woman may be called *Suknapanga* ('God willed') from the proverb 'God willed; Death unwilled' (*Suku wapanga; Kulunga wapangulula*), or *Mbunduimm* a proverb about customs differing: 'The mist of the coast (is) the rain of the upland' (*Ombundu yokombaka ombelayokona.n*) (Ennis 1945: 3). A similar tendency is noted among the Ganda, who often prefer to leave a proverb to be completed by the hearer: names are sometimes the first word of a proverb, and even the title of a book appears as just '*Atanayita*' (from the proverb *Atanayita atenda nyina okufumba*—'The untravelled man praises his mother's cooking') (Snoxall 1942: 59; Nsimbi 1950: 204–5). Thus on any particular occasion the actual form of a proverb may vary according to whether it is abbreviated, merely referred to, or cast in one or other of various grammatical forms. But the basic patterns which mark Bantu proverbs tend to recur and be recalled in their various citations.

7 See e.g. Knappert: 1966*a*; for some non-Bantu rhyming proverbs see Jackson 1919.

8 This, incidentally, makes the alphabetical classification adopted by some collectors an unsatisfactory one.

Bantu proverbs, then, are noted for special patterns which in many cases give a poetic flavour to the saying. They use various devices to express the thought succinctly and sometimes rhythmically, or even in what Chatelain calls 'blank versification' (1894: 22). The effectiveness is heightened by the fact that often, though not always, there are archaic or unusual words and picturesque phrasing.

Similar tendencies probably also occur in many non-Bantu proverbs, although no such detailed synthesis as Doke's has been published for any other language group. There is widespread evidence of balanced propositions. Yoruba proverbs, for instance, are said often to come in couplets with antithesis between the two lines, noun answering to noun and verb to verb: 'Ordinary people are as common as grass, / But good people are dearer than the eye', or 'Today is the elder brother of tomorrow, / And a heavy dew is the elder brother of rain', while repetition also occurs effectively in the form 'Quick loving a woman means quick not loving a woman'.[1] Parallelism and chiasmus also occur as in the Baule praise of mutual help, 'Gauche lave droite, droite lave gauche' (Effimbra 1952: 289) and rhythm may also be evident. Fulani proverbs use assonance, special grammatical forms such as subjectless verbs or the subjunctive without specific time reference, and parallel phrasing as in 'An old man does what men don't like, but he does not do what men don't know' (i.e. his actions may be unpopular, but they cannot be unnoticed) (Arnott 1957: 389). Related forms sometimes employ elaborate and studied expression; particularly good examples of these are the neat Fulani epigrams cited by Arnott or the long and complex Akan 'drum proverbs' (Nketia 1958*c*; see also Ch. 17, pp. 488ff.).

In proverbs the actual performance as distinct from apt citation and picturesque form is not usually significant. Nevertheless, it is sometimes of interest, perhaps particularly where the words themselves are not so elaborately stylized as in Bantu proverbs. Thus in Limba, where proverbs are not highly developed in any fixed form and there is little stress on rhythm or balance, I was told that in the saying mocking unjustified self-importance ('Do not walk like a European while wearing a loin-cloth'), part of its attractiveness lay in the way it was said, with a pause before the last word and the emphasizing of the idea of the loin-cloth by the long-drawn-out way in which it was pronounced. Herzog says of the Jabo that proverbs are uttered in a much more rhythmic way than would be the case with the corresponding words in ordinary speech (Herzog 1936: 8). Also a

more studied and rhetorical utterance is likely when, as so often in West African societies, proverbs are used in formal speeches before law courts. It is possible then that where the poetic quality of a proverb is not so evident in its verbal content, this is sometimes compensated for by the manner or the context in which it is said.

The question, therefore, of the actual style of proverbs appears to demand further research. Whatever the details, however, it is clear that *some* sort of heightened speech, in one form or another, is commonly used in proverbs: and that this serves to set them apart from ordinary speech.

III

Since proverbs can refer to practically any situation, it would be impossible to give any comprehensive account of the content of African proverbs. Something of their variety can be gathered from the headings under which they are classed in many collections (in terms either of explicit content or implied allusion), for these headings include every aspect of human affairs. Categories of the manifest content include such headings as 'Animals' (subdivided into, for instance, 'dangerous', 'game', and 'domestic'), 'Birds', 'Insects', 'Mice, rats, and others', 'Strangers, Europeans, and Europe', 'War, fighting, guns, and weapons', and innumerable others; while classifications in terms of the latent reference range from 'Man and woman', 'Efficiency and its conditions', 'Home life', 'Life and death', and 'Passage of time' to 'Conceit', 'Power', 'Cunning', and, of course, 'Miscellaneous'.

Since the actual import depends on the context of use, it is in fact impossible to give any definitive treatment of the allusive content of proverbs without a study of their situations; this material is not usually included in the published collections. A few general points, however, may be worth mentioning briefly and tentatively.

It could perhaps be said that though abstractions in the sense of generalizations are an essential aspect of proverbs, abstract notions are little considered in their own right (except perhaps in some of the more religiously orientated sayings of the Islamic peoples). The stress is rather on comments about human affairs; thus the Thonga 'The heart of a man is a sea' and the picturesque Yoruba saying about the mind confronted with a difficult problem ('As the leper's hand struggles to grip the needle') exemplify the exception rather than the rule (Junod and Jaques 1936 no. 803; Gbadamosi and Beier 1959: 60). It is noteworthy also that in most Bantu proverbs there are few references to religion; this contrasts with

West Africa where this topic is fairly frequent, particularly among Muslim peoples such as the Hausa and Fulani. This may perhaps be connected with the significance of the ancestor cult in many Bantu societies, so that the equivalent of this sort of allusion is made in terms of *human* experience and activity without reference to a transcendent god or specialist religious activity.

There are very many proverbs about authority, government oppression, or the burden of power. Some examples are the Akan suggestion that a king's sons do not need to be taught violence ('No one teaches a leopard's cub how to spring'), or the frequent reminders that even power must bow sometimes, which the Hausa express by 'Even the Niger has an island' and the Yoruba by 'The river carries away an elderly person who does not know his weight' (Rattray 1916: 63; Whitting 1940: 5; Gbadamosi and Beier 1959: 61). The Thonga saying 'The centipede's legs are strengthened by a hundred rings' alludes to the chief's dependence on the number of his subjects, while through 'Authority is the tail of a water-rat' they bring out the way power can slip away from its possessor; (Junod and Jaques 1936 no. 107) many other comments on the nature and consequences of power could be cited. Death is another favourite topic, for 'Death has many petticoats' and 'There is no hillside without a grave' (McLaren 1917: 344). The inexorability of death is often stressed—'There is no ragwort that blooms and does not wither' and 'Death has the key to open the miser's chest'—and resignation and the fact that no one after all is indispensable are also brought out: 'Even there where no cock is crowing, it becomes light' (McLaren 1917: 343; Rattray 1916: 51; Ripp 1930). The conflicts inherent in marriage are very frequently satirized ('Two wives are two pots full of poison', according to the Kikuyu), and self-importance is often picked on—as in the Kikuyu 'Knowing too much is like being ignorant', the Southern Bantu 'No cleverest fellow ever licked his own back', or the Nyanja '"Watch me" was carried off by a crocodile' (the man plunged in vaingloriously instead of patiently waiting for the boat) (Barra 1960: 2, 40; McLaren 1917: 341; Gray 1944: 112). But a list of popular topics could be prolonged almost indefinitely.

Something has already been said about the sorts of comparisons that appear explicitly in the proverbs. Very often these are to animals or birds, not because Africans have some mystical closeness to nature but because many live in relatively rural and sparsely populated areas where the animal world impinges closely on their lives. But in fact almost anything of which people have experience—not excluding problems of modern

government—can appear directly in their proverbs. It is often impossible to grasp the point or attraction of a given proverb without some knowledge of the cultural background and of what the thing mentioned means to those who utter it. Thus the effectiveness of the Zulu saying that 'No proud girl ever had the better of the skin-skirt' is lost to us unless we know that it is customary for only married women to wear skin-skirts and that the proverb therefore refers to the tonic effect of marriage on 'proud cheeky girls' (Nyembezi 1954: 11). Similarly the image in the Xhosa likening of a woman to 'a mimosa tree that yields gum all day long' arises from the Xhosa fondness for chewing gum, and the picture in the Mongo proverb 'La marche pendant les eaux hautes, c'est celui qui marche devant qui est intelligent' fits their swampy surroundings where the one in front warns those behind of holes and obstacles underwater (McLaren 1917: 333; Hulstaert 1958: 412). Among pastoral people as preoccupied with cattle as are many of the Southern and Eastern Bantu it is not surprising to find very many proverbs referring to cattle. There is, for example, the warning 'Don't throw away the milk-pails' (your last hope), the common description of a liar ('He milks even cows which are in calf'), and the comment on people's sensitivity and interdependence in terms of cattle, 'It licks the one which licks it, it kicks the one which kicks it' (Ripp 1930, Nyembezi 1954: 6). The interests of each society tend to be reflected in the sort of images through which their proverbs are expressed—like the Ashanti experience of gold ('Wisdom is not gold-dust that it should be tied up and put away'), or the Fulani interest in rank in 'Les vêtements cachent le corps mais ne cachent pas la généalogie'—even a rich and well-dressed man of servile origin will still only be a slave: appearances are not everything (Rattray 1916: 154, Gaden 1931: 103).

Similar comparisons sometimes occur over a wide area, often in nearly the same words. This may be partly due to cultural contact between peoples in the present or past. Many Hausa and Fulani proverbs, for instance, are near identical in overt meaning and translation, and the same applies to the Kru and Jabo of Southern Liberia and many others. The Bantu languages provide many examples of this, the more striking owing to their similarity in language as well as sentiment. Thus very similar proverbs are mentioned in many collections from different Bantu societies—'The eye crosses a full river' (usually referring to man's ambition), 'The buttocks rubbing together do not lack sweat' (friction between those who live together), and 'The sweat of a dog ends in its hair' (a poor man must swallow his wrath or, alternatively, hard work and effort are not always appreciated). Doke gives

a detailed example of the way a proverb can take slightly different forms in the many languages in which it occurs (this one is the equivalent of our pot calling the kettle black): the Ila 'The baboons laughed about one another's overhanging brows'; Tswana 'A monkey doesn't see its own hollow eyes'; Kimbundu 'The monkey does not notice his tail'; Nyanja 'Baboons laugh at one another's buttocks'; Swahili 'The ape sees not his own hinder parts, he sees his neighbour's' (Doke 1934: 360). The comparisons, then, are close. But the actual application and interpretation may vary from society to society, whatever the wording.

The range of comparisons and applications, then, is enormous. References to the animal world seem particularly frequent everywhere, but they are by no means the only analogies. These include everything with which a given people is preoccupied, and the extent to which any single sphere is stressed depends, as one would expect, on the culture and experience of a particular society.

IV

So far we have been considering the content and formal characteristics of proverbs in Africa. However, it is particularly true of proverbs whose use and application depends so crucially on their context that no full understanding can be reached without some knowledge of the occasions and purposes of their actual use. To consider the myriad different occasions (and hence meanings) would manifestly be impossible—as a Fante elder put it, 'There is no proverb without the situation'[9]—but some comments should be made about the main contexts of proverbs and the functions they fulfil.

There are two themes that one encounters particularly in any discussion of the uses and contexts of proverbs. First, there is the sense of detachment and generalization inherent in proverbs. The speaker stands back, as it were, from the heat of the actual situation and draws attention, for himself or others, to its wider implications. And secondly, there is the oblique and allusive nature of expression through proverbs that makes it possible to use them in a variety of effective ways.

Perhaps most often mentioned is their use in oratory, particularly in law cases or disputes. In this situation proverbs are often used by one or

9 Christensen 1958: 232; see also the story about the Akan attitude to proverbs cited in Evans-Pritchard 1963: 7.

other of the parties to get at his opponent or try to make out a good case for himself by drawing some analogy through the image in a proverb. Among the Anang Ibibio, for instance, proverbs are often skilfully introduced into speeches at the crucial moment and are influential in the actual decisions reached (Messenger 1959). In one Anang law case, the plaintiff managed to stir up antagonism towards the accused (a chronic thief) by alluding to his past record and untrustworthy reputation. He did this by quoting the proverb 'If a dog plucks palm fruits from a cluster, he does not fear a porcupine': if a dog can deal with the sharp needles of the palm fruit, he is likely to be able to face even the porcupine's prickles; similarly a thief will not be afraid to steal again. In this case, however, the thief's guilt was not in fact clear. As part of his defence he on his side used a proverb which was influential in winning over the judge to acquit him, hinting at the way in which he alone had no sympathizers and supporters—'A single partridge flying through the bush leaves no path' (Messenger 1959).

Counsellors and judges also use proverbs to comment obliquely on the conduct of those involved, often with implied advice or rebuke. A number of these have been recorded among the Nyanja, for whom the court is *the* place for the use of proverbial wit and wisdom and who often refer to such cases in metaphors drawn from hunting. As they put it, '"Quietly—quietly" doesn't kill game (that which) kills game is "there it is! there it is"'—unless, that is, those who bring the case explain what it is all about, they cannot expect to win any more than a hunt can be successful without noisy beaters driving the game into the net; what is more, the judge should be quiet and listen like the guard at the net. People are rebuked for their wrong behaviour in court and reminded allusively that what they are doing falls into some general category they too disapprove of. Telling lies, for instance, only makes matters worse: an animal caught in a net only entangles itself further with wild struggles, and so a man is told in court that 'It is patience which gets you out of the net'. Again, those who try to excuse themselves before the court by saying that what they did was only a small thing may be reminded that 'The thing which upsets the porridge-pot is a small piece of *tsekera* grass' (Gray 1944: 107; 108).

In court and elsewhere there are also frequent occasions for using a proverb to smooth over a disagreement or bring a dispute to a close. According to the Yoruba proverb, 'A counsellor who understands proverbs soon sets matters right' (Ellis 1894: 218), and a difficult law case is often ended by the public citation of an apt proverb that performs much the same

generalizing function as citing legal precedents in other societies. Some of these might be classed as juridical axioms and maxims, but many in fact succeed just because the attempt at reconciliation is oblique and through an analogy rather than a straightforward injunction. The contenders are not only brought to view the dispute in a wider perspective (and thus be more ready to come to terms), but this is conveyed in a tactful and allusive way. Among the Limba, for instance, an elder in court tries to persuade one party to a dispute not to be angry with someone younger by reminding them that one 'does not shoot the chimpanzee for its ugliness'; i.e. one should not go to extremes in punishing a child, however bad, any more than one actually kills a chimpanzee because it is ugly. In pronouncing his decision the president of an Anang court frequently uses the proverb 'If you visit the home of the toads, stoop' to remind those involved that one should conform to the divine moral law, and the Yoruba make the similar point that once a dispute has been brought to an end it should then be regarded as finally settled—'When the face is washed you finish at the chin' (Messenger 1959: 70; Ellis 1894: 231). In a less formal context, the Kikuyu bring an interminable and profitless discussion to an end by asking the question, agreed to be unanswerable, 'When new clothes are sewn, where do the old ones go?'[10]

More or less formalized law cases, then, provide many opportunities for proverbs. However, they also occur in less formal situations for giving ordinary advice. Here too their oblique and tactful nature makes them particularly effective. Many examples of this could be given. In Lamba culture, for instance, the young are warned in such terms as 'Your mouth will turn into a knife and cut off your lips' or 'You will let the mouse rot in the trap' (i.e. let the opportunity pass) (Doke 1934: 361), and among the Tetela the proverb 'The palm-tree grows in the tall grass' may be used as a gentle hint to parents that it is best to leave a child alone and to let him play and get dirty—he will grow up (Stilz 1939). The Oron miser who, with some polite excuse, refuses a request, particularly for money, is told obliquely that the asker knows quite well that he does not really want to do it: 'The child who refuses to go an errand says he does not know the way' (Simmons 1960*b*: 135: slightly expanded to make the literal English translation clear).

This function of proverbs to advise, rebuke, or shame another into complaisance has been particularly well described for the Ila of Zambia (Smith

10 Stevenson 1927: 246; on judicial proverbs, see also Meeussen 1959; Van Goethem, 1947; Schapera 1966.

and Dale ii, 1920: 311ff.). A man may be reminded that, as we would put it, Rome was not built in a day—'One day is not sufficient to rot an elephant'—or that pride and contempt of authority are not admired since 'We do not like the pride of a hen's egg': eggs in a nest are all equal, so one of them should not be proud. Practical as well as ethical advice is given: 'If you eat with one chief only, it is because you have no feet', for you should get what you can out of all of them. Ridicule and mockery in proverbs are also effective. As Smith writes of Ila proverbs, wit has a utilitarian aim; laughter is never far away, and because of their susceptibility to ridicule the Ila, like many others, can sometimes be laughed out of a thing more than deterred by argument or force. Thus Pharisees are mocked as those who 'spurn effectively the frog but drink the water': they are the kind of people who object to finding a frog in their drinking water but are perfectly happy to drink once the frog has been removed. Another pressure is through irony, assuming that what *ought* to be done *is* always done; the quickest way to gain hospitality among the Ila is to quote 'The rump of a visitor is made to sit upon' (Smith and Dale ii, 1920: 312). Indeed, any kind of satirical or penetrating comment on behaviour may be made in the form of a proverb and used to warn or advise or bring someone to his senses. He is reminded of the general implications of his action—and the fact that the reminder is cast in apparently innocent and irrelevant terms may make it all the more effective.

There is another aspect of proverbs that is connected with their use for comment or persuasion, and which sometimes appears in a specialized and extreme form. This is their oblique and suggestive character. The speaker wishes to convey something, but in such a way that later on he can deny that he actually stated what was implied, or so that only some among his listeners may understand the point. This type of suggestiveness is developed to a particularly high degree in the Zande *sanza* in which a kind of malicious double-talk is used to convey a meaning other than the obvious sense. Again, the Nyanja have a special term that can be translated as 'speaking by opposites' by which they make deliberate mis-statements with an esoteric intention—the older people and *cognoscenti* can understand, but not other listeners (Gray 1944: 102). Similarly among the Thonga a proverb may be used with an apparently clear meaning but in practice a completely different intention (Junod and Jaques 1936: foreword), while the Kamba *ndimo*, 'dark saying', is a kind of secret language (Lindblom iii, 1934: 28).

Irony or sarcasm as a way of getting at someone is, of course, widespread in many forms, but the proverb is a particularly good way of conveying this. This kind of implicit attack on another, already mentioned in the

context of a formal law case, sometimes takes more unusual forms. An example is the elliptical language of names. Through this people can refer to another's fault while at the same time avoiding any direct commitment. Thus, among the Karanga, a dog may be called by the proverbial name 'Things which change from day to day' in allusion to a capricious wife, or a flirtatious woman may be called 'All eyes' as a reproof since she has eyes for all personable males; similarly a dog's name may be 'Home-wrecker', given him by a suspicious husband to warn off his wife's lover (Hunt 1952).

Certain themes seem to be present in the various contexts of proverbs we have discussed so far. Though proverbs can occur in very many different kinds of contexts, they seem to be particularly important in situations where there is both conflict and, at the same time, some obligation that this conflict should not take on too open and personal a form. Such conflict can occur in many different ways—there may be competition for scarce resources, there may be a stress, as among the Zulu or Ibo, on the idea of personal achievement or, as among the Azande, on the significance of hierarchy, with the competitiveness for advancement and notice so closely connected with these; in all these situations there may also be an idea that the conflict involved should not be allowed to become extreme and explicit. It can be seen how the veiled and metaphorical language of proverbs is particularly relevant in such contexts.[11] Indeed, proverbs may also be specially suitable even in everyday situations of advice or instruction where the hidden tensions that are sometimes inherent in such relationships are controlled through the use of elliptical, proverbial speech. Even in cases of overt and institutionalized conflict—for example, the law cases in the more highly organized African states—proverbs play a part in formalizing and controlling the conflicts involved. In some Western societies, there are provisions in the legal system for minimizing personal clashes involved in lawsuits while at the same time making it possible for each side to present their case effectively by the relative impersonality of the written word, and by the institution of counsels for each of the two parties who, as well as forwarding their clients' interests, impose a kind of veil which prevents direct confrontation. It seems that in certain non-literate African societies the use of proverbs may fulfil something of the same function.

11 Proverbs are not, of course, the only way of dealing with such situations and relationships in non-literate societies. There are also, for instance, witchcraft beliefs and accusations; the use of veiled political and satirical songs; or joking relationships. In this last form, the opposite means is, in a sense, being chosen: proverbs may deal with conflict by smoothing it over; joking resolves it by exaggerating the hostility involved and thus, in its way, resolving it.

Proverbs, then, may be a particularly suitable form of communication in situations and relationships of potential or latent conflict. This aspect may perhaps serve to throw some light on the fact that whereas some peoples make great use of proverbs, among others, for instance the Nuer, they seem to be of little or no importance.[12] For it may be that it is precisely those societies in which there is marked latent conflict, or in which there is particular need to regulate formalized conflicts, that proverbs play an especially large part.

Collectors and commentators frequently mention the use of proverbs in education. Although the details are often not made very clear, it seems that there are several different senses in which proverbs can fulfil educational functions. Sometimes proverbs (and other verbal forms like riddles) are used in a quite specific way in societies that lay great stress on initiation ceremonies. The initiates may be instructed in the proverbs and aphorisms current in the society, just as they are also often taught dances, songs, and other skills. Among the Chaga, for instance, proverbs play an important part in formal instruction during initiation ceremonies and are highly valued; (Raum 1940: 217; 333–34) 'the Chaga', it is said, 'have four big possessions: land, cattle, water and proverbs' (Raum 1940: 217). This sort of formal instruction may have a certain esoteric intention; the members of the group versed in these proverbs are now, by their very knowledge, marked off from those who have not yet reached this stage. In addition, in a non-literate society instruction through proverbs provides a means for relatively formal education and transmission of cultural traditions. Proverbs with their implicit generalized import are clearly a suitable and succinct form in which to verbalize socially prescribed actions and attitudes.

Proverbs, then, are sometimes used quite formally and consciously as a vehicle to achieve the ends, and in the same sort of contexts, that we associate with formal education. However, when collectors comment on the educational function of proverbs they do not necessarily intend to convey such a specific role as that described above, one which certainly does not occur in every African society. What they often seem to be describing is the *general* educative role of proverbs. Now proverbs often imply some general comment on the way people do, or should, or should not behave. It is clear that the conveying of a people's experience and expectations can be

12 A point raised by Evans-Pritchard in 1963*b*: 109; and, so far as I know, nowhere satisfactorily discussed.

performed in a particularly effective way through the use of proverbs. But proverbs are in practice cited in a whole variety of situations, and only in some of them does there seem to be any intentionally educational purpose. The manifest aim may in fact be to get at an opponent, to defy a superior in a polite and oblique way, to make an effective and unanswerable point in a speech, etc.—yet at the same time the latent function is performed of transmitting a certain view of the world, a way of interpreting and analysing people and experience, and recognition of certain situations. Among the Ibo, for instance, proverbs fulfil this aim incidentally even though the explicit occasion is that of a dance. As the masked dancer progresses, he has proverbs and aphorisms called out before him, and, as Green writes, 'the chanting in front of the masked figure of these utterances is a way of steeping the members of the society in the traditional values of their culture' (Green 1948: 840). Other quasi-educational results which may come from the frequent use of proverbs seem only incidental, not really distinguishable in kind from the general socialization and education undergone by people just because and in that they are members of a particular society.

In between these two extremes there is the kind of situation in which, without any specific formal occasion for their use, proverbs are yet consciously used from time to time with the intention of instructing or of giving advice. Thus we are told of proverbs in many societies (e.g. Zulu, Lamba, Ila, Nyanja, Kuanyama Ambo, Fante, Anang Ibibio), that they are used for 'instruction' or 'child-rearing'. Most authors, however, do not give details of the actual situations of such usage. It is true that the generalizations implicit in many proverbs make them suitable vehicles for this sort of instruction; but the occasions we are told about suggest that what in fact is often being done is to convey the applicability of a proverb to a particular *situation* rather than to teach any actual generalization implied or stated in the proverb. This too is of course a type of education. But it is perhaps not quite that implied by the frequent references to the 'educational purpose' of these proverbs.[13]

13 Straight generalizations and aphorisms are sometimes included in collections of proverbs and these may be used to instruct in some general sense; but further study may show that several of these satisfy neither the criterion of being a generally accepted truth, nor that of involving allusive, figurative, or otherwise picturesque expression; they are thus strictly only marginal to the analysis of proverbs and of oral literature in general.

Besides these relatively utilitarian aspects of proverbs it is clear that there is also what might be called a purely literary aspect. That this view is not just that of the outside observer is clear from the overlap in terminology already mentioned between proverbs and such unquestionably literary genres as stories, parables, or riddles. In the case of certain peoples, indeed, their proverbs (sometimes together with their riddles) appear to be the richest or most interesting part of their oral literature, for example the Fang (Tardy 1933: 282) and the Anang Ibibio (Messenger 1959: 64). Of the proverbs in many African societies we are told that they are consciously used not only to make effective points but also to embellish their speeches in a way admired and appreciated by their audiences. It is part of the art of an accomplished orator to adorn his rhetoric with apt and appealing proverbs. The Anang Ibibio reputation for eloquence largely arises from their skilful use of proverbs, and a Zulu orator who can quote aptly, readily, and profusely is particularly admired (Messenger 1959: 64; Vilakazi 1945: Ch. 10). Proverbs are also used to add colour to everyday conversation. This aspect seems to be very widespread indeed and in some cases at least to be an art cultivated to a very high degree. Thus among the Mongo, proverbs are said to be continually cited; among the Zulu, someone who did not know their proverbs would be lost in the allusiveness of their conversation; while among the Bambara, proverbs are honoured to such an extent that they tend to use a proverb every two or three phrases even in everyday conversation (Hulstaert 1958: 5; Stuart and Malcolm 1949: introduction; Travélé 1923: 35). The Akan allude to the subtlety in proverbs by their saying 'When a fool is told a proverb, the meaning of it has to be explained to him', and as Nyembezi writes of the Zulu, in words also applicable to many other African cultures, proverbs are essential to life and language: 'Without them, the language would be but a skeleton without flesh, a body without soul' (Rattray 1916: 152; Nyembezi 1954: 44).

This literary use of proverbs in ordinary speech is sometimes taken further and shades into more elaborate forms like the Akan drum proverbs, Fulani epigrams, or Zulu bird songs. Unlike many other prose forms, proverbs are not normally used specifically for entertainment but are more involved in everyday situations. However, we do hear occasionally of contests in proverb telling. Among the Fante proverbs are recited as entertainment both at casual gatherings in the evening and at ceremonies and celebrations with a panel of judges to decide between the contestants, while Lestrade writes of the South African Bantu that proverbs are sometimes used in a regular game similar to that of riddle

asking—interpretations of proverbs are exchanged and the players 'buy' a new proverb and its interpretation in exchange for one they know (Christensen 1958: 239; Lestrade 1937: 293–4). In all these contexts the proverb is a vehicle particularly suited to give depth and elegance through its allusive, figurative, and poetic mode of expression.

Proverbs, finally, are often said to represent a people's philosophy. In proverbs the whole range of human experience can be commented on and analysed, generalizations and principles expressed in a graphic and concise form, and the wider implications of specific situations brought to mind. This aspect has always appealed particularly to collectors. Some editors have taken it rather far and suggested that proverbs make up 'tribal law' (e.g. Barra 1960: foreword) or illustrate every belief and prescribed piece of behaviour in a direct and literal way. This is to miss the flexibility and situational aspect that is so striking a characteristic of African proverbs. As has been pointed out by several authorities, the same proverb may be used in a whole range of situations with different applications and meanings. Furthermore, as has frequently been noticed, the occurrence of 'contradictory' proverbs is widespread; thus the Southern Bantu stress both the unruliness *and* indispensability of a man's tongue: 'The mouth has no lid to cover it', yet 'The tongue is a man's tail-switch to drive away the flies'; (McLaren 1917: 341) and many other such examples could be cited. If interpreted as literal injunctions or evaluations, clearly there is contradiction. Instead they might be regarded as a way of summing up what is recognized as only one facet of the truth, to be used as and when it applies or appeals; then it is possible to appreciate more fully the flexible and subtle way in which, through a whole series of overtones and depths of meaning, proverbs represent 'the soul of a people'.

In relation to the question of the occasions and functions of proverbs something should be said about the people who cite or listen to proverbs. There is not much evidence on this, but clearly the details vary from society to society. Sometimes the proverbs are potentially known to everyone and free for all to use on suitable occasions. The actual use, of course, depends on the occasion: thus where proverbs are most common in law cases and men are the chief litigants, proverbs are seldom used by women; and proverbs giving advice are most naturally used by elder people. In other societies there seem to be certain proverbs that are reserved for use only by older people and would not be cited in the presence of youths or uncircumcised adults. Sometimes proverbs as tools in argument are reserved for the elderly alone; thus of the Fon Herskovits tells us that 'one

limiting principle governs their use. The young may not presume to press a point with their seniors by using proverbs (Herskovits 1958: 57). Among the Nyanja proverbs are sometimes used with a definitely esoteric intention (Gray 1944: 102), and we may guess that in societies with a fairly high degree of specialization, particularly with regard to religious and artistic affairs, there is likely to be a group who are particularly conversant with the allusions and possibilities inherent in proverbs. The situation described of the Mongo is very likely typical of many societies: that whereas some proverbs are used by the whole population and known very widely, others are rare or reserved for certain specialists (Hulstaert 1958: 5). But this whole subject is obscure and the evidence scanty.

There is also the question of individual authorship and originality. Since one of the characteristics of a proverb is that it should be accepted by the community as a whole, the scope for individual initiative is clearly limited. However, the fact that there is a certain amount of variation in form and the great range of varied situations to which proverbs can be applied with greater or lesser aptness and insight give some opening for individual contributions. There is a certain amount of evidence about the way new proverbs are coined by individuals and later taken up by the community. As Nyembezi points out about the Zulu, there are no special people with the job of evolving proverbs, but new ones nevertheless arise through individuals; and we are told elsewhere that many Zulu proverbs were first uttered by famous men or by bards or jesters before the king or at a beer-drink and were then taken up and popularized by others (Nyembezi 1954: xi; Ripp 1930). It is common for proverbs to be attributed to well-known historical personages; this is often conventional but in some cases may be justified. Similarly new proverbs are mentioned as being taken by individuals from various outside sources, or arising from individual inventiveness and poetic imagination within the framework of the conventional forms and functions in any given society (cf. Herzog 1936: 7; Hulstaert 1958: 5–6).

We can, then, sum up the various ways in which proverbs are used in African societies by saying that they really occur on *all* occasions when language is used for communication either as art or as a tool—i.e. on every sort of occasion imaginable. In particular societies there may be certain rules or tendencies about the sorts of occasions on which they are most frequent or suitable, or the classes of people who should use them. Some peoples may use proverbs in a particularly sophisticated way as the basis

for more elaborate forms of literature, while others stress the useful aspect of proverb-citing or their more literary and artistic purpose. But they are above all used as a form of formalized conflict and its resolution, as an oblique and allusive way of communication, as a form of expression with a certain educational relevance, as an artistic activity in its own right, or as all these at once.

V

So far the discussion has been rather general and comparative. However, some of the points made may emerge more clearly with a discussion of the nature and use of proverbs in three specific societies, ones which differ in language, social organization, and geographical location.

First, the Jabo. These are a Kru-speaking people living in small independent settlements in south-eastern Liberia. Their proverbs were collected and studied in the 1930s by Herzog and his native assistant. They were published in the original and in translation with a full commentary on their various meanings and situations and an illuminating introduction (Herzog 1936).

Though it is difficult to estimate the number of Jabo proverbs it seems to be considerable; Herzog gives 416 (in addition to related 'sayings') and considers that more could have been collected and that new proverbs were constantly being made. Jabo proverbs shade into other forms: the 'sayings' (which are sometimes merely idiomatic expressions); the 'singers' words' (or 'lying words'), that is formalized statements, easily transformed into proverbs, which singers introduce into their songs of praise; and the 'titles' or honorary addresses for characterization and praise. Proverbs are more or less distinct from these forms in their style, being more poetic and symbolic than the 'sayings', but considerably less poetic than the other two forms.

The proverb proper is termed *dalekpa*, a word also used for a parable or short animal tale rounded out with a proverb which serves as the moral. The term is also said to be connected with an archaic form meaning 'old matters', and this implies the idea of taking an old situation and applying it to the present, coping with it by regarding it in the light of something that has occurred before. It is also connected with the idea of generalization in idioms like 'He quotes stingy proverbs' (i.e. 'He supports his stinginess with generalities'), used of someone who by way of excuse evades a request with stock phrases.

Although the citing of proverbs is not a specialized activity like riddling or story-telling, and occurs freely and informally in every sort of context, there are nevertheless certain stock situations where proverbs are especially frequent. They play an important part in Jabo legal proceedings; indeed at a certain stage the discussion mainly takes place through the quoting of proverbs. In this way the case can be raised from the particular to the general and can be classified according to the generalizations inherent in proverbs. The more proverbs a man can use, the more effective he is considered to be, and 'since almost any act has legalistic aspects, there is hardly a discussion of any consequence (whether or not actually in court) in which proverbs are not employed' (Herzog 1936: 2). Proverbs are also very commonly used to smooth social friction and help individuals to adjust themselves to their positions; there are a very great number of proverbs implying 'under the circumstances what did you expect?' that are used in these contexts (e.g. 'The butterfly that flies among the thorns will tear its wings' or 'If you marry a beautiful woman, you marry trouble', a comment, among other things, on the dangers attending prosperity). These are often particularly effective in smoothing dissatisfaction because uttered by an older person in a society where seniority is taken seriously. Besides their general use in legal and social life, both formally and informally, proverbs also provide the means by which generalizations can be made explicit, and at times provide an intricate and artistic intellectual exercise for the adept.

The characteristic of proverbs which Herzog brings out most forcefully is their flexibility. The same proverb may be used as advice, instruction, or warning, and may be cited in situations that may seem far removed from the original application, or even in contradictory senses. Thus the saying 'We watch the bird's neck while he is talking' can be used in at least three situations with different meanings: as a retort when someone weak makes a threat, meaning that before taking a threat seriously we should look to see who makes it; as an expression of doubt about the truth of what another is saying; and, finally, as an indication that everyone agrees with a speaker (Herzog 1936: 70) Jabo proverbs thus have a wide range of applicability, and the ostensible meaning can in certain situations even shade into its opposite.

The form of Jabo proverbs is somewhat removed from that of everyday prose utterance. Many proverbs begin with '. . . says: . . .', as in 'North wind says: if you rise, they will know you are there' (used either to point out something self-evident or to remind that a man must demand in order to get his due). The supposed speaker is often either some natural object,

(sea, plant, etc.), people (e.g. the Kru, white people), or, very often, specific animals or birds. Such proverbs can be quoted either with or without this attribution. There are also other introductory formulas used for emphasis which may or may not appear on a given occasion, such as 'I say' or 'It is the truth what they say'. Very many proverbs have the patterns 'If . . ., then . . .', 'Where . . ., there . . .', or give rule of conduct with the impersonal pronoun 'one'. The ideas of contrast and of limitation are also frequently brought out by the form. Contrast is emphasized in, for instance, 'When the spirits are gone, dogs will serve the wine', a complex proverb which implies among other things the contrast between mature age ('spirits') and careless impetuous youth ('dogs'); and limitation is conveyed by alluding to the immutability of certain laws in 'When it rains, the roof always drips the same way'. Poetic and archaic expressions occur, and the poetic tone is intensified by the symmetrically balanced structure and occasional rhythmic swing which is accentuated in actual utterance. In this way, proverbs are a kind of technical language, with specialized vocabulary, style, and linguistic and logical constructions.

These proverbs and related sayings, then, are described as playing a central role in Jabo society. They characterize and evaluate persons, events, and situations, interpret the particular into general and recognizable experience, and are 'the most important verbal instrument for minimizing friction and effecting adjustment, legal, social, or intellectual . . . they form a vital and potent element of the culture they interpret' (Herzog 1936: 15).

The Zulu of South Africa are exceedingly rich in proverbs. These have been extensively collected and commented on for many years. The best account is that by Nyembezi who has published over 700 proverbs, gleaned-both from earlier collections and from his own field-work.[14]

In Zulu, as in many languages, it is not easy to draw a sharp line between idioms and proverbs proper, but there seems to be a general distinction in form and terminology between 'sayings' or plain prose usages (*izisho*), and *izaga*, proverbs. Consonant with the general Zulu interest in rhythm, music, dance, and poetry, their proverbs are often marked by a certain metrical form which makes a contrast with plain prose. This is often brought out by balanced structure such that contrasted subjects are governed by one predicate (thus presenting two opposed ideas), by contrasted predicates governed by one subject, or by contrast in both subjects and predicates.[3]

14 Nyembezi 1954; unattributed references are to this work throughout this section.

Word-order is important so that verb contrasts with verb, adverb with adverb, and so on, and cross-parallelism also occurs. In some proverbs the contrast lies in the ideas rather than the words themselves. Economy of expression is particularly marked in Zulu proverbs, often with elision of vowels or whole words and the subject suggested only by the concord. Certain patterns occur frequently and give the proverbs a distinct form even when, as in some cases, they lack rhythm. There are frequent expressions in terms of two, three, or four word-groups, and a specially popular form is that beginning with *akukho* (or its abbreviation *aku*), 'there is no . . .', as in 'No polecat ever smelt its own stink': people fail to recognize their own faults. The vocabulary used seems to be the everyday one, but the proverbs cease to be ordinary not just because of their special forms but because they are generally accepted as clever and attractive expressions of some truth.

The proverbs gain their significance from the situations in which they are used. If some of the proverbs appear to have contradictory senses, this is merely because there are many possible situations and different angles from which one can look at a problem. Besides their importance in teaching, proverbs are also commonly used in lawsuits and arguments to minimize friction. They are used too in general comment on people and the world, often humorously. Proverbs can be used to enrich and enliven speech at every level, whether of formal oratory or of everyday conversation, and are regarded as essential to the life and language of the Zulu.

The images in terms of which many of the Zulu proverbs are phrased are primarily drawn from observation of human behaviour, of the ways of animals, and of other things in the natural environment. As we would expect of a pastoral people devoted to their livestock, there are very many proverbs connected with cattle and cattle husbandry. Hunting is another popular subject; birds are often referred to, and the proverbs in fact often merge into, or appear in, the songs attributed to many well-known birds (see Dunning 1946). Proverbs may also contain references to historical events, such as those which speak of the famous Shaka, or they may be connected with well-known tales, sometimes gaining their effectiveness through referring to the events in the tale, and sometimes apparently giving rise to the story.

There are a great number of proverbs about hospitality, and about both bravery and caution. Change of fortune is another common theme, and many involve recognition of different types of people, whether within or outside the family—the good and bad, crafty and cunning, honest and

truthful, or angry and overbearing—(the last compared to 'a log with a centipede in it'). Through all these topics, and many others, the Zulu are able to comment on and mould their social experience; their proverbs are an important facet of their conversation and literature.

The final example is that of the Azande of Central Africa, a people characterized by their powerful aristocratic class of princes, their state organization which gives rise to competition and jealousies among those at court, an authoritarian model for social relationships, and the tortuous and suspicious mentality that goes with all this. They have developed a characteristic mode of speech, *'sanza'*, an oblique and ambiguous form of expression of which their proverbs form only one example. This double-talk (including proverbs) has been described by Evans-Pritchard in a series of articles drawing mainly on his own field-work supplemented by published collections of proverbs (Evans-Pritchard 1956, 1963*a*, 1964*a*).

The Zande term *sanza* means both proverb and spite (or jealousy) and, in addition, refers to the whole range of circumlocutory expression in which there is a hidden as well as a manifest meaning, usually malicious. The Azande have many proverbs and these are marked by the same kind of characteristics as those of other peoples. Though they do not rhyme or show much alliteration, there is a certain rhythmic balance between the two halves of the sentence: 'Cautious one was grazed by the spear / it went right through the careless one', or 'The little gazelle stood by the fallen tree / and said he was bigger than it'. Where this balance is lacking the Azande tend to supply it with an introductory half-sentence. Besides the presence or absence of such prefaces there are also other variations in their verbal structure, and it is common for the proverb not to be spoken in full but to be alluded to by only an extract from it.

The content of the proverbs is sometimes derived from Zande folktales and their meaning depends on a knowledge of these. But the metaphors seem most frequently to arise from the intimate Zande knowledge of wildlife, connected with the fact that their traditional form of settlement is in scattered homesteads with wild life all around them. Very many of the images are taken from wild creatures, from hunting, and from collecting activities; far fewer are taken from agricultural work and domesticated plants—a fact which Evans-Pritchard thinks may be explained by the relatively recent change from hunting and collecting to agriculture.

Evans-Pritchard has documented fully how the situation in which a proverb is cited affects its import, so that any one proverb may have a wide

range of meanings. So, for example, the saying 'The wildcat honoured itself by its cry' can be variously interpreted as a reference to the respect resulting from its cry, with the implication that even if someone is not honoured he can manage for himself; to the fact that the wildcat prizes her own cry and that each person talks after his own fashion; and to the idea that 'as there is no one who will exalt me I must exalt myself' (Evans-Pritchard 1963*b*: 6). Many similar examples are given of differing interpretations of single proverbs.

Proverbs seem most typically to be used for warning, to bring another to a sense of proportion, and to comment on or ridicule another's action. They are also used, in a connected way, to take the wind out of another's sails in a dispute. Thus if, instead of saying bluntly 'you are bringing trouble on yourself, you express it as the undeniable fact that 'the frog brings down rain on its own head', you have an unanswerable argument, you come out of it uppermost, and you manage to sting your opponent while sounding quite innocent.

Besides its sense of proverb, *sanza* also refers to ambiguous or hidden language in a wider sense. Usually this form of speech is used in a malicious way, often with the intention of speaking *at* someone while seemingly making an innocent remark. It is particularly common between man and wife and between courtiers in jealous competition with each other at a prince's court, but it enters into all Zande social activities. By using this form of speech, as with the narrower class of proverbs, a man can get at another while at the same time keeping himself under cover; the sufferer will not be able to make overt trouble, and in any case the insult, being hidden, can be withdrawn without loss of dignity. This oblique and veiled form of speech is one which, as Evans-Pritchard shows in some detail, fits the suspicious and competitive outlook of the Azande, and can be connected with the authoritarian nature of their relationships and their dominant fear of witchcraft.

This hidden and oblique form of speech, then, with its overtones of playing safe and avoiding direct commitment, is one developed to a high degree among the Azande. However, it seems to be an element in all use of proverbs, one which comes out particularly in situations of conflict or uneasy social relationships and where depths of hidden meaning are sensed or implied.

Proverbs in Africa are effective in a whole range of ways in life and in literature. This might not be immediately obvious from the manifold, usually un-annotated, volumes in which African proverbs have been

collected. Their literary significance emerges not only in the beauty of words and form, their sense of detachment and generalization, and their connections with other genres of artistic expression, but also in the aptness and perceptiveness with which they are used in an actual context. Perhaps the most interesting point to emerge from the writings of those who have studied the actual use of proverbs is their *situational* aspect. Proverbs are used on particular occasions, by individuals in a particular context, and their wit, their attractiveness, their insight, even their meaning must be seen as arising from that context.[15]

15 Like stories and riddles, proverbs are among the most readily collected items of African oral art. Besides references already given here and in the Bibliography, see the useful bibliography and list of collections in Bascom 1964; also references in Doke 1947 and the extensive bibliography in the general article by Werner 1961, 1962.