

Book review

Revisiting Ancestral Wisdom: A Review of J.C. Chakanza's Wisdom of the People Blantyre : CLAIM, 2000. Paperback. 469 pp. ill K750

A few years ago I did an update of the proverb collection in the country. Joseph Chakanza's *Wisdom of the People* requires a similar review as a way of entering the text. There have been several Chinyanja/Chichewa collections over the years. Rattray and Hetherwick's *Some Folklore Stories in Chinyanja* (1907) was the earliest with only seven proverbs. Johnson's *Chinyanja Proverbs* (1922) followed two decades later with one hundred and one proverbs. A decade later Kumakanga's *Nzeru Zakale* (1931) appeared in manuscript form with one hundred and eight. Gray's *Some Proverbs of the Nyanja People* (1944) came out almost a decade afterwards with one hundred and seventy-nine items. There is a big jump to Gwengwe's *Chinyanja China* (1964) with one hundred and three proverbs. *The Chichewa Intensive Course* (1969) came out with three hundred and fifty-eight proverbs. Eight hundred proverbs were collected in Safroy's (1990) unpublished manuscript. One of the reasons for quantifying the output in previous publications is to measure them against the current publication which boasts of two thousand Chinyanja proverbs. The other more serious one is to examine how Chakanza's presentation measures against his predecessors. How much has he gone beyond previous collections?

To answer this question adequately we need to explore more the nature of the previous collections themselves and the reasons for engaging in paramiology.

Previous publications

It is not strange that most and even the largest collections are Chinyanja or Chichewa. The language was the official vernacular in the colonial and post-independence periods. Although the earliest collection in the country was on Yao folklore (1882) no proverb collection has appeared in it outside Sanderson's occasional passing examples in his *A Dictionary of the Yao Language* (1954). T. Cullen Young valiantly embarked on Tumbuka proverb collection in the 1930s. The output was very small. This was followed by other sporadic small outputs by Sanderson and Mkandawire in the 1950s. After a big jump the northern languages were only represented again by Mphande's Tonga proverbs (1997). There were passing references to Ngoni proverbs in Gray's 1931 collection but there was no separate collection until the 1980s and 1990s when Soko embarked on the project from scattered sources. These are the only works for the minor languages in a country reputedly of sixteen or seventeen linguistic groupings.

From the names and titles of the publications one can arrive at the composition of the collectors too. Briefly, the earliest were non-Malawians from the opening of the century to almost mid-century. One might say these had to surmount great linguistic and cultural if not psychological barriers to come up with the collections at all. It is only in the last half of the century when Malawians took up the task. Chakanza belongs to this group of indigenous collectors.

The purpose and audience for the collections can also be described briefly. The early collectors were missionary-turned-anthropologists or folklorists. Some were actually administrators if not traders with an interest in linguistics and paramiology. Underlying their interest was the desire to understand the people and for the missionary to find out how best to evangelise them. Some of the collections then were folklore or linguistic items, others were scholarly, anthropological studies. Early Malawian collectors like Kumakanga, Nthara and more recently Gwengwe, Phiri and Mphande fall into the same grooves. Chakanza is no exception. His primary aim was :

to contribute to the preservation of cultural memory... to understand them (proverbs) better and to promote their use because their potential value for modern thought and life is little recognised (p.9)

Although this was the intention he also had specific readers in mind. This audience is similar to the age-old ones of the previous collectors:

theologians, political scientists, economists, sociologists, lawyers... the student of language and culture... (to integrate) traditional proverbs with their various disciplines in the quest for a genuine African identity (p 9).

This is one of the reasons for placing Chakanza among his fellow collectors so we can fairly assess his effort in that context.

To a certain extent Chakanza's *Wisdom of the People* falls between the serious and popular kind of collection. There have been monumental annotated collections like Gray's. These were followed on one by handful of academic studies like Mapanje's Master of Philosophy thesis (1975) and more recently Mphande's doctoral thesis (1997). On the other hand there are "mere" collections like *Chichewa Intensive Course*. Some of them are annotated, however, the annotations are explanations of meanings or translations like Kumakanga or Gwengwe. Others have made comparative forays between Christian and Western concepts like Phiri and even Mphande's. Chakanza leans more towards the last group: translations, explaining and practical application. In this way the collection is more useful for the pulpit and popular reading and the classroom than the more demanding and rigorous world of academia. Chakanza admits that he had also this kind of audience when making the compilation. The quote above ends in the use of the proverbs in:

our system of education... and by the younger people who are only acquainted with a few of the commoner proverbs (p9)

With this aim the kind of audience specified the proverbs are presented in a similar painless manner.

Packaging the proverbs

The presentation of the proverbs is described in the "Introduction". The arrangement is by alphabetisation throughout with the "first word" (sic) as the governing principle. (We will come back to the problems raised by this below). Each proverb is followed by the English translation, then meaning in both the vernacular and English. The two thousand proverbs and figurative expressions, actually two thousand and nine according to the listing, are presented first in the main text. The main text is divided into two. The first part has one thousand and thirteen proverbs considered as "proper,". The second part has "Figurative Expressions" .

The main text is followed by a separate listing of the proverbs in their single entities (without translation or meanings, etc). The same applies for the Figurative Expressions. The last listing is for meaning or subject matter or themes only.

As indicated above this is a straight forward arrangement. It makes for quick reference in both the main text and the other sections. For those who only need to find a particular item they have the choices in front of them. For others who want the themes first, they are also listed separately.

As part of the "package" some of the proverbs are illustrated. Fifteen proverbs have been treated in this manner by Samson Kambalu. These are welcome pages to relieve the monotony of proverbs, more proverbs and more. However, a brief comment on them is required here.

There have been illustrations of Malawian proverbs in the past. These have ranged from realistic to cartoon-like representations. *Moni Magazine* is the most extended exercise. After illustrating the proverbs in their magazine they put them together on cards and disseminate them like that. These were realistic sketches. *Wasi Magazine* had a short stint on cartoonist representation of proverbs too. These were also realistic. *Reflections Magazine* has a cartoonist who illustrates most of its articles. A travel article using proverbs by this reviewer was done in this style.

Samson Kambalu's illustrations also range from the realistic (e.g. 522 "kudyerana masuku pamutu, p. 123) or 1225 ("Nsupa ndi nsupa, mulibe thonje") to the semi-abstract (e.g. 1360 "sayenda adabala mwana adayenda" or 1873 "Mtantha palumo"). The reason for pointing this out is that for the type of audience envisaged some of the illustrations might be too abstract to understand, for example, the last named. Even

some of the realistic illustrations have some abstract elements making them difficult to interpret, for example, 1360 above. This point, however, does not detract from the excellence of the drawings. In fact, they are also a welcome change from the usual realistic portrayal of this genre in other publications.

Taking the collection to task

The discussion will now look closely at some specific aspects of the collection. These are related to the number of actual proverbs, the treatment of variants, the inclusion of English and new proverbs in the language..

The actual number of proverbs in this collection will never be established with any amount of accuracy for several reasons. First, the main text includes both proverbs and figurative expressions. Although figurative expressions have their own section some are still found in the proverbs proper section. For example euphemisms or idiomatic expressions like 127 “chaombaguta” or 1198 “nkhutukumve” or popular expressions 1- “Abale sakondwera” or 67 “Apatsa mosiyana”. There are almost two dozen of these with rather an indeterminate status. Related to the first reason is the fact that as if aware of this transitional “status” some items are listed in both sections intact, for example 872/1859 “meta mpala wopanda madzi” or 1198/1891 “nkhutukumve,” mentioned above. Thirdly, alphabetisation gives rise to the problem of proverbs with more than one initial word. 223 has “chipande cha therere”, 383 has “kachipande katherere,” 223 “chinziri”/382 “kachinziri”. This problem is prominent in the diminutive class.

In such cases the same duplicated proverb is listed as a separate or new one thereby increasing the actual total number of proverbs. The fourth problem is a reverse to the previous one. There are several proverbs with more than one variant listed under the same numbering (or alphabetical letter) system 27 “Akula vumbwe wotantha patsekera /Akula pusi wokhala patsekera /kukweza bakha patsekera,” has three. 512 has four variants. Several have two distinct variants. In all cases these variants, however distinct in wording, are listed as one entry.

The problems of variants above give rise to the related problems of cross- referencing. Some of the variants do have similar meanings with other proverbs across items. For example, the “chipande” and “kachipande” etc group mentioned above do not have notes leading the reader to see them as similar. Similarly different proverbs with the same meanings are not cross- referenced, for example, (65) “Apao ndi mchenga, madzi apita pansi,” and (66) “Apao ndi mizu ya kachere, akumana pansi”. There are numerous examples of such types. Although the author talks of “These authors’ (i.e. sources) material was invaluable for cross checking, double checking ...” (p13) it is felt the same should have happened on the final products.

To a certain extent, on the other hand, the inclusion of the variants is a positive view of the material, so the reader is not left in doubt or hunting for them elsewhere. Another

positive element is the provision of the contexts or usage for some of the proverbs. Some of the meanings are prefaced with 11-“said about” 1088 “proverb said to...” In other proverbs the original accompanying narrative is also given . 1592 “wakufa sadziwika” has the most extended narrative in the whole corpus. A general positive aspect also is the inclusion of English equivalents. Where there is a similar proverb or expression in English this is also given. There are several of this type. For example, 77 “Bemberezi adziwa nyumba yake,” “ Home sweet home” 1570 “wachoka pa chivuula ndipo wanka kwa chimwa mchere”, “From the frying pan into the fire”. Readers familiar with both cultures are catered for in this way.

Being familiar with both English and Chinyanja proverbs, on the other hand, brings in the problem of which ones belong genuinely to which language or culture ? There is no problem if we are dealing with only equivalents. There is a problem when they seem to be translations of one another. Take 421 “kambalame kolawira mmawa kadakhuta nyongolotsi “T”: The early bird got satisfied with worms “M.”. “The early bird catches the worm”. Whose proverb are we dealing with here? There are about a dozen of this type.

Related to the above but not really a problem is the inclusion of modern proverbs. Some new constructions are clearly signalled by the use of loan words : 443 “kansalu ka wani mitala”. This is just coming into the language where the culture did not measure in “metres”. Other new ones are like 1437 “ubale waufulu uli pa malemba “A close relationship is through writing” (i.e. correspondence). This is a demonstration of current proverbs in the making enriching the language and increasing the repertoire.

The problems of style

A discussion of the style has been given a separate section to give it full justice. The vernacular and their English versions reach the reader through language . Therefore the use of language requires its own separate consideration.

In the “introduction” the collector declares that “a fair variety of the cross section of proverbs in this region” (p 9) is found in the collection . Fair enough. So is a variety of vernacular dialects from Mang’anja (230 “nipha”) to central region Chichewa (1516 “umfobwerera “). All this range is expected since the data is from different dialects (Chichewa, Chinyanja, Chimang’anja). Any attempts to standardize would have affected the flavour and the genuineness of the data . Unfortunately the same allowances cannot be accepted in the translations and the explanations.

The English prose discussing, commenting and extrapolating the data also contain styles (or registers) ranging from colloquialisms to Latinate constructions. For example 599 “why the dickens did I do it”? 1384 “He has done bugger all!” at one end of the

scale, through: 86 “those people whose mode of action” 91 “a wonderous kind”, and, making some stopovers in neologisms 213 “one eyewitness is better than ten hearsayers” (the most popular, it occurs at least three times in the corpus). At least in the anthorial discussions one expects uniformity of individual style (idiolect, idiograph ?).

Of course, the author hastens with disclaimers in the “introduction” that the translation may not be as refined as the English language require...(A) certain purity of language in the translation has to be sacrificed in order to remain faithful to the source... (even though)... translation in plain English cannot fully render the original meaning... (since) it is difficult to find corresponding words in English that can exhaust these original meanings (p 11).

Again a wide range of efforts can be isolated. At the bottom is the impossible translation because there is no English equivalent. Several wild life : birds, insects and animals could not be translated. So you have 81 “bololo insect, “218” mpheta bird “or 391 “ chipeta grass”. Where strict translation was followed you have constructions like 85 “the amarathus spinach is tasty when tender” on one hand and 95 “a traditional grain store” on the other . Perhaps these are to be expected . The unexpected and even inexplicable are those with several translations for the same object “chipande” is “spoon” (223), “sharing spoon (wooden)” ladle (224) 116” wooden spoon (ladle)” 1533. The “chinziri” is” patridge” 222 and “harlequin quail” (382). Or when the same proverb is translated differently in the same text. The “chipande” proverb is “The spoonful of okra relish becomes tasty by inviting one another” and “The spoon of okra is delicious if we visit each other “ 383. This is why we stressed the importance of cross referencing to double check stylistic infelicities, too.

There are several strategies adopted also for difficult translations. On one hand short cuts are adopted. A specific object is generalized 426 “kantande alemba pali khola”. “The bird of prey circles where there is a hen house” (see also 776 or 1696). On the other the general becomes the specific 487 and 489 “khoswe” becomes “the black rat” There are tortuous translations like 29 “to verbally ask for”. Some of them are entirely uneconomical, 73 “Nothing of domestic significance can be found in the home of a sluggard.” Some of them require knowing the original to understand what the translation means, 796 “Eyes of the dark slept with a leper woman 519” simultaneous eating made the legs of a hyena part widely”. The reviewer is still wrestling with the comment under 186 “something cynical is going on here” or 92” friendly deeds should swing back and forth”.

The output

To compile two thousand proverbs from scattered sources (out of print, rare, unpublished manuscripts, oral data, etc) is a monumental task. Chikanza should be commended for the heroism. Very few proverb collections are in the public domain for

popular consumption. The "Kachere" series should be congratulated for the undertaking. In the final analysis, however we revert to the collector. Joseph Chakanza has a penchant for collecting things. One of his major publications is a collection of break-away churches from established orthodoxies. This publication also resists a higher intellectual framework or theoretical underpinnings for the reader's edification.

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