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The Popular Proverb as an Identity Discourse: A Cultural Sociological Approach

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Abstract

This article examines the popular proverb as a fundamental component of intangible cultural heritage and collective cultural identity. It highlights the proverb's value as a condensed outcome of accumulated human and social experiences that reflect the historical, cultural, and cognitive realities of societies. The article discusses both the linguistic and terminological concepts of the proverb, emphasizing its rhetorical and social characteristics. It further focuses on the sociological role of proverbs in interpreting collective behavior and regulating social relations. The study argues that the popular proverb constitutes an identity discourse that expresses the prevailing system of values and norms within society. It also clarifies the status of proverbs in contemporary scientific research, particularly in sociology and anthropology, and highlights international efforts especially those of UNESCO to safeguard this heritage. The article concludes that the popular proverb represents the memory of society and its profound cultural imprint.

Keywords: popular proverb; cultural identity; intangible heritage; social discourse; collective memory; cultural sociology.

Introduction

The popular proverb is considered one of the most prominent forms of cultural expression, encapsulating the social and historical experience of a society in concise linguistic formulas imbued with deep symbolic and semantic significance. This form of folk discourse has contributed to the consolidation of systems of values and social norms, as well as to guiding individual and collective behavior across different historical periods. However, the central problem addressed by this article lies in questioning how the popular proverb transforms from a simple linguistic expression into an effective identity discourse that contributes to the construction of collective consciousness and the shaping of a society's cultural identity, and to what extent it is capable of representing social transformations.

The choice of this topic stems from the importance of the popular proverb as a core component of intangible cultural heritage, as well as from the growing need to reassess it through a scientific lens that transcends traditional descriptive approaches. The article aims to analyze the popular proverb as a symbolic sociological structure, to uncover its social and cultural functions, and to highlight its relationship with identity and collective memory. The study adopts a descriptive-analytical methodology supported by a sociological approach, through the analysis of selected popular proverbs and their linkage to the contexts of their production and circulation, drawing on both heritage sources and modern theoretical frameworks.

Folk heritage constitutes an essential part of the history and culture of societies, as it represents the vessel from which beliefs, traditions, authentic values, language, ideas, practices, and lifestyles are derived elements that collectively express cultural and national identity. It also serves as a bridge of communication between generations, one of the fundamental pillars of development, modernization, and social construction, and a core component in shaping personality and crystallizing national identity. Popular proverbs are considered a vital element of folk heritage, produced by specific ethnic and linguistic groups under particular historical and geographical conditions. The importance of folk heritage lies in its role in studying human societies in their authentic reality, as it acts as a truthful mirror that presents images of life with transparency and originality, without concealment or disguise. For this reason, scholars of sociology and anthropology have accorded folk heritage a prominent status in their research and studies

The Concept of the Proverb

Al-Mubarrad states that, from a linguistic perspective, the term *mathal* (proverb) is derived from *mithāl* (example). It refers to a widely circulated saying that draws a comparison between two similar situations, originating from the notion of analogy. He illustrates this with the verse of Ka'b ibn Zuhayr:

"The promises of 'Urqūb were merely proverbial,

And her promises were nothing but falsehoods."¹

Similarly, al-Maydānī explains in his book that proverbs were given this name because of the clarity and vividness with which their meanings are grasped by the intellect. He writes:

"They were named thus due to the mental imagery they evoke, derived from *mithūl*, which denotes vivid mental representation."²

A Western scholar offers a related definition, stating that:

"The origin of the proverb lies in the equivalence between two things in speech such as the saying '*As you judge, so shall you be judged*', which resembles the expression '*this is like that*' or '*its counterpart*'. From this, every well-known wise saying came to be called a proverb..."³

In another passage, Abū Hilāl al-'Askarī emphasizes the complexity and depth of proverbs, describing them as a distinct branch of knowledge requiring rigorous study. He states:

"Proverbs constitute a specific field of knowledge; mastery of it is attained only by one who diligently seeks it, deeply engages with it, and refines their understanding through repeated effort. Merely memorizing rare expressions does not suffice to interpret or uncover the intent behind proverbs. Rather, their understanding requires familiarity with their origins, narratives, and cultural contexts something achieved only by those devoted to narration and academic inquiry."⁴

The term proverb came to refer to a concise literary statement distinguished by conscious intellect, deep reflection, and a refined linguistic craft characterized by eloquent structure and stylistic harmony.

2. Terminological Definition of the Proverb

There exist various definitions of the proverb some prioritize its literary dimension over its social function, while others focus on its stylistic form. Ibn al-Muqaffa‘ believed that when speech takes the form of a proverb, it becomes more pleasant to the ear and easier to remember. He said:

"When speech is cast in the form of a proverb, it becomes clearer in meaning, more agreeable to the listener, and more expansive in application."

Likewise, Ibn ‘Abd Rabbih emphasizes the aesthetic dimension of proverbs, stating:

"Proverbs are the embroidery of speech, the essence of expression, and the adornment of meaning. They were cherished by Arabs and Persians alike, and spoken across times and tongues. They surpass poetry in familiarity and are nobler than oratory. Nothing has traveled as widely or spread as broadly as proverbs hence the saying: '*More widespread than a proverb*'.⁵"

Here, he underlines the wide circulation of proverbs from ancient times to the present.

Al-Marzūqī, for his part, focuses on the brevity of proverbs, stating:

"A proverb is a phrase that is complete in itself or self-sufficient in meaning. It gains acceptance and widespread use, and is transferred from its original context to any analogous situation without alteration of its wording, extending its apparent meaning to similar ideas. Thus, it is employed regardless of its original circumstance, even when its initial context is unknown."⁶

Proverbs are marked by their generality and simplicity. Al-Fārābī defines them in his *Dīwān al-Adab* as:

"That which is accepted by both the elite and the common folk, in both form and meaning, to the extent that it becomes part of their everyday speech uttered in times of ease and hardship alike. It captures exquisite meaning, fulfills distant aims, alleviates distress, and exemplifies the utmost eloquence. For people do not rally around that which is lacking in quality or excellence."⁷

Quoting al-Maydānī, Ibn al-Sikkīt adds:

"A proverb is an expression that may not match the literal meaning of its apparent subject, but matches its intended significance. That is, the expression is likened to a model upon which other things are fashioned."⁸

Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm al-Nazzām famously said:

"Four qualities converge in the proverb that are not found together in any other form of speech: conciseness of expression, accuracy of meaning, elegance of analogy, and excellence of metaphor. It is the pinnacle of eloquence."⁹

The Proverb According to Contemporary Scholars

Professor At-Tali Bin Sheikh attempted to define the proverb with the following statement:

"A proverb is one or two sentences often reliant on rhyme, intended to convey wisdom and admonition... The popular proverb is a distilled or summarized version of a story or narrative, and cannot be fully understood without knowing the underlying tale it reflects."¹⁰

Azeddine Jalawji describes the proverb as:

"A concise expression, elegant in both form and meaning, produced by the general public. It serves as an honest mirror of the people, expressing their civilizational heritage, lived reality, hopes, and future aspirations. It is often connected to a real story, regardless of whether we know its author."¹¹

Dr. Rabah Al-'Ubi defines it as:

"A widely circulated or inherited saying factual or mythical that possesses distinctive features and components. At its core, it represents an analogy, expressing something indirectly through comparison, without altering the intended meaning. Its phrasing differs from that of the subject it describes, by likening one situation to another. It is, therefore, a model or pattern on which similar sayings are based."¹²

While these definitions aptly describe the external and literary features of the popular proverb, they do not capture its full depth. The proverb carries with it **socio-historical implications**, functioning as a **tool for interpreting and categorizing social realities** across successive stages. Consequently, broader definitions emerged that linked proverbs to the traditions and customs of the people without dismissing their literary and aesthetic dimensions. Indeed, **the literary and social components of the proverb are complementary**, working together to form a more holistic understanding.

A proverb reflects **the distilled experiences of a people**, the outcome of their accumulated wisdom. It serves as a vehicle of insight and truth grounded in reality. Unlike poetry, which relies heavily on imagination, the proverb stands apart through its **brevity, subtle metaphors, and aesthetic eloquence**.¹³

It is a **product of the environment in which it first emerged**, a **collective social creation** representing the voice of the community.

Proverbs and the Social Sciences

Popular proverbs are considered a **core element of folk literature**, conveying the collective mentality of a society. They encode insights into human behavior both toward the self and others. Folk memory serves as the **custodian of these expressions**, regulating behavior through repeated usage and preserving proverbs from being forgotten. In doing so, they remain a fundamental component of national cultural identity **encapsulated in concise statements rich in symbolism and meaning**, reflective of ancestral experiences passed down through generations.

Proverbs endure because of their **aesthetic, rhetorical, and symbolic qualities**, penetrating human consciousness and encouraging contemplation. They represent **ready-made social formulas**, capturing and addressing recurring life situations in succinct, relatable language. Studying proverbs, therefore, allows us to understand **society's collective stance toward the challenges it faced across**

history. They help **uncover aspects of society overlooked by historians**, such as internal value systems, power dynamics, and everyday struggles.

In recognition of this intangible heritage, **national and international bodies** including specialized scientific institutions have **established mechanisms to preserve and document proverbs**. Notably, **UNESCO**, during its 25th session in Paris (1989), recommended initiatives to safeguard such heritage and promote global cultural diversity.¹⁴

Several scholars have recognized the **scientific importance of proverbs**. Some universities have incorporated **Paraméologie** (the formal study of proverbs) as a dedicated field of research. Academic conferences such as those held at the **University of Lille in France**, and various institutions in **Algeria and the Maghreb** have explored proverbs as a **distinct form of cultural discourse**.

Researcher **Claudine Chaulet**, with her extensive experience in the field, noted that **sociologists in the Maghreb** have come to appreciate the importance of interpretive approaches to folk traditions, especially proverbs, as a means of studying **social change** and listening closely to **emerging cultural narratives**.

The Popular Proverb as an Identity Discourse

Popular proverbs have always been a **product of a society's religious, civilizational, and moral heritage**. For a saying to become a widely circulated proverb, it must reflect the **collective experience and circumstances** of a people. Thus, the proverb is inherently tied to the socio-historical context of its origin. Algerian proverbs such as:¹⁵

- ❖ "My homeland is my homeland even if my sleep is silk and my mattress cotton,"
- ❖ "Grandparents' wealth fades, but craftsmanship endures,"
- ❖ "Greed corrupts character,"
- ❖ "Don't be fooled by the oleander's flowers it blooms in the shade but may be toxic,"

...illustrate how proverbs were used to **instill values, correct behavior, and guide moral judgment**.¹⁶

These expressions occupy a powerful position in society, influencing people's emotions and decisions. They **govern behavior**, endorse communal norms, and **discourage deviation**. They have become **internalized laws** a kind of **unwritten constitution**. Proverbs, in this way, function as a **moral and cultural authority**, comparable to other **normative forces** in society.¹⁷

As such, proverbs convey **cultural and symbolic values** that regulate daily life. According to **Lucien Goldmann**, literary production (including proverbs) is not a simple reflection of collective consciousness, but rather a **harmonized expression of a group's aspirations**, directed toward achieving balance within their sociocultural reality.¹⁸

Proverbs, Popular Culture, and Identity

Naif Al-Nawaisa noted that every folk environment possesses its own distinct temperament and expressive tools through which this temperament is revealed. Folklorists refer to this as *local identity*, which researchers and observers recognize as the unique cultural map of a people or subgroup. This identity is anchored in markers that reveal its nature and direction: the **voice, words, popular proverbs, tales, songs, riddles, and folk poetry**, among other forms of expressive heritage.

There is no doubt that **the popular proverb mirrors the collective thought and orientation of a society**, capturing dominant values related to gender roles, the dignity of labor, life, marriage, social rituals, and existential matters. It serves as a **social soul**, shaping the identity, role, aspirations, and dreams of a community. Many proverbs reflect how a society perceives the roles of men and women in daily life.

Proverbs represent **the most widespread and common form of folk expression**, present in every culture. They reflect a people's **customs, way of life, beliefs, and moral standards**. In this regard, **Ahmad Qandil Al-Baqli** remarked:

"A proverb, as we understand it, is the essence of a lived experience. Through it, a person expresses what they have gained from that experience and the judgment that experience imprinted in their conscience."

Thus, proverbs are the **distilled memory and wisdom of nations**. They are characterized by **stability, brevity, rapid spread, and transmission across generations and languages**, adapting to different times and places. For this reason, proverbs have received **special scholarly and literary attention**. Early Arab scholars, recognizing the immense value of this eloquent linguistic treasure, collected and organized proverbs in significant works such as:

- ✚ "Jumhurat al-Amthāl" by **Abū Hilāl al-‘Askarī**,
- ✚ "Majma‘ al-Amthāl" by **al-Maydānī**.

This interest was not limited to linguists. In recent decades, various **human sciences** have focused on proverbs as a research field to explore **the cultures and histories of peoples**. These include disciplines such as **anthropology** and **ethnography**.

Folk Heritage and Cultural Identity

Folk heritage and proverbs in particular constitute a foundational pillar of **cultural identity**. One could argue that folk heritage is the **cultural content of a nation's identity**. It is the **psychological reservoir** of the masses and the **emotional vitality** of a community.¹⁹ In the end, heritage represents:

"A set of solutions developed by past generations for the problems they faced."²⁰

This means that heritage embodies the **active cultural intelligence of society**, materialized through human experience. Elements of heritage form the **core weight** of any cultural identity or social structure.

Identity, in this sense, is a **cultural expression** that reflects the inner content of social and cultural life. It is the **outcome of accumulated traditional experiences**, by which a society defines and distinguishes itself from others. **Customs, traditions, folklore, attire, and mindsets** are all expressions of cultural identity.

The point to emphasize here is that **folk heritage especially proverbs represents the deepest and most significant component of identity**. It is the **fingerprint of belonging**, marking a people's most profound feelings and human perceptions.

Folk Heritage as the Genetic Blueprint of Identity

Folk heritage is deeply embedded in the **collective unconscious**, present more powerfully than any other force. It functions as the **genetic map of human identity**. Unlike literary or intellectual heritage, **folk heritage permeates the collective conscience spontaneously**, shaping the innermost layers of thought and emotion. The **soul of a people is reflected in its folk heritage**, which resides at the very core of its cultural psyche. Thus, we may conclude that **folk heritage is the root, the essence, and the genetic signature of identity**.

Conclusion

Ultimately, caring for folk heritage is a **vital historical necessity**. It constitutes the **living historical depth of our existence**, and is an **inexhaustible cultural treasure** for generations striving to affirm their identity and place in the world. We must work to **cultivate the positive values embedded within this heritage and draw upon them to build the present and future**.

At the same time, it is essential to remain **open to the other**, benefiting from their civilization, values, and human knowledge. This engagement must be launched **from within our own creative heritage** not as a retreat into the past, but as a **foundation for renewal**

Findings

1. The study demonstrates that the popular proverb constitutes an integrated symbolic system that reflects the cognitive and value structure of society. It cannot be treated as a mere linguistic product detached from its historical and social context.
2. Popular proverbs have shown their capacity to condense collective human experience into a normative discourse that guides individual and collective behavior over time.
3. It becomes evident that proverbs play an informal regulatory role in society, with an influence comparable to that of formal legal systems, especially in traditional communities.
4. The apparent contradictions among certain proverbs reflect the dynamic nature of society, its plurality of perspectives, and its varying stances on social and ethical issues.
5. The popular proverb emerges as an effective tool for reinforcing cultural identity by reproducing shared values and social representations.

6. Proverbs reveal how society perceives central issues such as gender roles, labor, authority, and social relationships.
7. The study confirms that proverbs serve as a valuable scientific source for understanding social transformations that are not documented in official historical records.
8. The decline in the use of popular proverbs corresponds to a weakening in the transmission of collective memory across generations.
9. The proverb does not merely reflect reality; it actively contributes to reshaping it through symbolic guidance, critique, and influence.

Recommendations

1. It is essential to revalorize popular proverbs as epistemological and sociological material, rather than treating them as mere folkloric ornaments.
2. Incorporate proverbs into educational curricula particularly in subjects such as language, civic education, and history to strengthen cultural identity among the youth.
3. Encourage interdisciplinary studies that bridge sociology, anthropology, and linguistics to explore proverbs in their multifaceted dimensions.
4. Raise awareness among cultural and media institutions about the role of proverbs in preserving collective memory and enhancing national belonging.
5. Reexamine popular proverbs through a critical and reflective lens that distinguishes between values worth preserving and those misaligned with modern social transformations.
6. Support young researchers in conducting fieldwork focused on the usage and evolving meanings of proverbs in contemporary society.
7. Promote the scientific documentation of proverbs, linking them to their historical and functional contexts.
8. Work to protect proverbs from distortion or superficial use in media discourse.

Proposals

1. Establish national digital databases of popular proverbs, categorized by social and semantic domains.
2. Launch field research projects to monitor the changing use of proverbs across different generations.
3. Organize international academic conferences dedicated to the study of proverbs as cultural and identity discourse.

4. Integrate popular proverbs into contemporary cultural productions such as theater, cinema, and literature as expressive tools of identity.
5. Develop educational programs that utilize proverbs to promote critical thinking and humanistic values.
6. Encourage comparative approaches between proverbs from different cultures to uncover shared human values and cultural specificities.
7. Involve local communities in the collection of proverbs to preserve their authenticity and prevent their extinction.
8. Leverage digital media and social platforms to disseminate proverbs in contemporary formats while preserving their original meaning

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