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Miscellaneous

The World's Oldest Living Proverb Discovered Thriving in Ethiopia*

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Introduction to the Proverb

The oldest living proverb in the world is about a dog being hasty and therefore giving birth to blind puppies. An ancient king of Assyria, Šamši-Adad, wrote on a clay tablet to Yasmah-Addu, his son and viceroy in Mari, advising him not to be too hasty in his actions. In his instructions to his son he warned, ‘Heaven forbid that, as in the ancient proverb, *kalbatum ina šu-te-bu/pu-ri-ša huppudūtim ūlid* “The bitch by her acting too hastily brought forth the blind,” you now do likewise’.¹ Based on this, Alster has described this proverb as having ‘a longer history than any other recorded proverb in the world’, going back to ‘around 1800 BC’.² Note that even at the time of his writing the father referred to it as an ‘ancient proverb’. It is a wonderful example of a metaphorical proverb, the reader of the letter would clearly have understood that the message had nothing to do with literal dogs giving birth to literal puppies.

* As always, I gratefully acknowledge the patience, editorial insight, and support of my wife Carole Unseth. Also, I am grateful for suggestions from an anonymous referee, especially regarding artistic effects in the Guḡḡi proverb. I am indebted to Mark Harlan for help with the Arabic form, including keying the proverb in Arabic script. I am very grateful to Ted Kai Gatwich, now of Khartoum, for information about the Nuer proverb form. He told me in 2017 by email that it is a new proverb in Nuer, but did not speculate where it was borrowed from. I am very grateful to Joseph Malual for his help, giving the word-by-word gloss, even though the proverb is from a form of Nuer further east than his own. I am happy to acknowledge Ervin Starwalt for his help with glossing Greek examples.

¹ Moran 1978, 17–18. ‘Bitch’ is a technical and somewhat archaic term for ‘female dog’.

² Alster 1979, 5.

Moran wrote, ‘The proverb about the hasty bitch producing blind whelps needs no introduction to the [European] classicist. Familiar with it perhaps in many other languages (English, German, Italian, Turkish, and so on), he certainly knows the [ancient] Greek version’.³

Erasmus gave a Latin form of it in his published collection of proverbs, his *Adagia*: ‘Canis festinans caecos parit catulos’.⁴ We can assume that Erasmus’s Latin *Adagia* (published in 1500 with subsequently enlarged editions until 1536), which spread many other proverbs across Europe,⁵ was instrumental in spreading this one across Europe where it had not previously been known.

Many scholars have written about this proverb, but always in languages from a limited geographical range: Mesopotamia and Europe.⁶ These languages are all north and west of the earliest Mesopotamian documentation.

Now, far from these areas where scholars are familiar with this proverb, this study documents it to the south of Mesopotamia, in contemporary languages of Ethiopia, a land famous for its riches in proverbs.⁷ At this point in time, we can document that the proverb about the dog giving birth to blind puppies is found far from the regions where it has been previously reported. But we can only speculate about its original creation and the details of its spread between the Middle East and Ethiopia.

What makes this discovery noteworthy is not merely that yet another proverb is documented as having a wider range than had been known before. Rather, it is noteworthy because this is the world’s oldest living proverb and it has been studied by many, but always studied within Europe and the Middle East. Now this paper documents it in Ethiopia. Additionally, this paper explores two variants of this proverb, one with a hasty dog and one with a hasty cat, presenting evidence that the dog version is original.

³ Moran 1978, 17.

⁴ Erasmus is known for his compilation of a book of proverbs in Latin, but also for producing the first critical edition of the entire New Testament in Greek. I am indebted to him for both of these, since both have led to my employment and enjoyment.

⁵ Mieder 2014, 13.

⁶ Alster 1979; Avishur 1981; Bodi 2015; Bonechi 2014; Bremmer 1980; Chavalas 2014, 84, 85; Dalley and Reyes 1997; Gordon 1958a; Gordon 1958b; Hinz 2004; Moran 1978; Moran 2002; Slings 1976; West 1997.

⁷ All rejoice in the great increase in recent proverb study in Ethiopian languages by Ethiopian scholars (Fekade Azeze 2001). Since Fekade’s article was published, the proverb scholarship by Ethiopians has continued to increase, as seen in the sources cited by Unseth et al. 2017, 23, 24.

Mid-East

The earliest recorded version of this proverb was written by King Šamši-Adad in Mesopotamia, an area that is now within Iraq. The proverb is still found in Mesopotamia, in modern Iraqi Arabic, one version with a hasty dog and another with a cat: ‘The bitch in her hurry whelps blind pups’ and ‘The cat in her haste kittens blind kittens’.⁸

البيزونة من عجلته تجيب ولدها عميين
 blind her-offspring brings-out her-haste from The-cat
 ‘The cat in her haste bears blind kittens.’

What is striking about this proverb from Iraq is that Avishur reported that he found it only in the Iraqi form of Arabic, not in other Arabic speaking areas.

It is noteworthy that the syntax of the proverb is identical in both Akkadian and Arabic, i.e., the Arabic version is a word-by-word translation of the Akkadian text. These sentences are build [*sic*] in the same way. The proverb, created by the folk mouth, appears to have been transmitted among the populace of Mesopotamia for generations, and translated by them according to which tongue they spoke: from Akkadian to Aramaic, and from Aramaic to Arabic. This assumption is supported by the fact, that in the collections of folk proverbs from Arabic countries (Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Egypt, Yemen and Bedouins) I have not found this proverb; it is also missing in the corpus of ‘Comparative Proverbs’ published by Al-Tikriti.⁹ Thus it appears that this proverb is not an original Arabic text, nor is it borrowed from a European culture.¹⁰

Greece

Moran believed that the proverb originated in Mesopotamia, ‘[t]his of course would not be the only piece of oriental wisdom to have worked its way west.’¹¹ If we presume that the proverb spread from Mesopotamia toward Europe, the earliest European attestations are (not surprisingly) in

⁸ Avishur 1981, 37, 38.

⁹ Abdul-Rahman Al-Tikriti (1966–1969) compared the proverbs of twelve Arab nations, but found this proverb only in Iraqi Arabic.

¹⁰ Avishur 1981, 38.

¹¹ Moran 1978, 18, n. 7.

Greek. The proverb may have travelled to Greece via Turkish, but this cannot be proven since the earliest Turkish record of the proverb is from the fifteenth century. Describing the location of the example from Turkey, between Mesopotamia and Greece, Bodi noted it is ‘geographically [...] significant’.¹²

The proverb’s adoption into Greek was early, Archilochus of Paros (seventh century BCE) referenced it: ‘I am afraid, lest acting hastily out of eagerness, I begat like a bitch in the proverb children blind and untimely’.¹³

[δε]δοιχ ὄπως τυφλα καλιτημερα
 [σπ]ουδη επειγομενος τωσ ὄωςπερ ἡ κύων τεκω¹⁴
 fear as blind good-days
 rushing gave-birth so over the-F dog then
 ‘I fear like the dog rushing, to give birth to blind pups.’

Other Greeks used it later, such as Aesop (sixth century BCE) in a fable about a bitch bragging to a sow how fast she gives birth,¹⁵ in return the sow taunted the bitch, ‘You give birth to the blind’.¹⁶

κύων επισπευδουσα τυφλα γεννα¹⁷
 dog hurrying blind birth
 ‘You give birth to the blind.’

Aristophanes used the proverb in his play *Peace* in 421 BCE: ‘The bitch in her haste gave birth to the blind’.

ἡ κύων σπεύδουσα τυφλα τίκτει¹⁸
 the dog rushing blind pups
 ‘The dog by haste produced blind pups.’

A fragment of Archilochus’s poetry citing this proverb was used as part of the wrapping of an Egyptian mummy from the first or second century

¹² Bodi 2015, 78.

¹³ Moran 1978; 2002.

¹⁴ Bodi 2015, 77.

¹⁵ The fable is number 223 in Perry’s standard index of Aesop’s fables (Perry 1952).

¹⁶ Bodi 2015, 77.

¹⁷ Houghton 1915, 28.

¹⁸ Moran 2002, 90.

CE.¹⁹ Though this was technically on the African continent, the fact that it was written in Greek and was from an era when Egypt was under Greco-Roman domination (both culturally and politically) allows us to conclude that the finding of this proverb was still within a Greek context more than African.

Europe

In Europe, it seems that the proverb first entered the continent via the Greek language. The Greek scholar and copyist Michael Apostolios (b.1420) transcribed many Greek proverbs, likely the source that brought this proverb to the attention of Erasmus.²⁰

Proverbs that refer to a bitch giving birth to blind pups (or a cat giving birth to blind kittens) because of her haste have also been found across Europe all the way to Britain where it has been passed down as ‘The hasty bitch bringeth forth blind whelps’.²¹

The proverb still lives on today in Modern Greek: ‘Η σκύλα από τη βιάση της τα κάνει στραβά τα κουτάβια της’ (‘The bitch made such haste that she gave birth to blind puppies’).²² It was adopted into German, where it lives on as ‘Die eilende Hündin wirft blinde Junge’. In French, it has come down as ‘La chienne dans sa hâte a mis bas des chiots aveugles’. In Italian, it became known in two forms, one with a hasty dog (‘Cagna frettolosa fa catellini ciechi’) and another with a hasty cat (‘Gatta frettolosa fa i gattini ciechi’).²³ Similarly, Portuguese has two versions, one with a dog (‘Cadelas apressadas parem cães tortos’) and one with a cat (‘Cachorra apressada pare filhos cegos’). In Spanish, the version with a cat is also found, ‘La gata presurosa para los gatitos ciegos’. In Romanian, the cat version of this is also found, ‘Căţeaua de pripă işi naşte căţei fără ochi’.²⁴

¹⁹ Merkelbach and West 1974.

²⁰ Hinz 2004.

²¹ Apperson 1993, 289.

²² Personal communication from Marina Mogli.

²³ Taylor 1962, 25; Bodi 2015, 77.

²⁴ Flonta 2012, 1.

Ethiopia

Documentation is provided here that this proverb, previously well documented and studied in Mesopotamia and Europe, has now been noted in at least four languages of Ethiopia. In book reviews, I have previously mentioned the parallel between the Akkadian proverb and proverbs currently found in Guḡḡi Oromo and Allaaba.²⁵ Also, the proverb has been documented in Western Gurage, a form of Gurage,²⁶ a Semitic language of south-central Ethiopia. Gurage is contiguous to Allaaba and near Guḡḡi Oromo, all in the south-central part of Ethiopia, near to each other. Allaaba is Highland East Cushitic, Guḡḡi Oromo is Lowland East Cushitic, and Gurage is Semitic. Speakers of all three of these language communities contain large Muslim populations which might suggest a link toward Arabic speaking areas to the north, but Avishur reported finding it only in the Arabic of Iraq.²⁷ It might also be suspected that the proverb is found in nearby Somali, a Lowland East Cushitic language like Guḡḡi Oromo. However, Georgi Kapchits, editor of a large collection of Somali proverbs, reported that this proverb is not found in Somali.²⁸ Also, it is not found in Amharic.

Examples of the proverb from each of the Ethiopian languages where it is found are transcribed as in the original sources.

Guḡḡi Oromo

‘Mali maqnee’, jette sareen jaamaa sagal deettee²⁹

why? evil said dog blind nine gave-birth

“‘What’s our sin?’” said a bitch after giving birth to nine blind pups.’

The Guḡḡi Oromo version of the proverb is recognizably similar, but different in some interesting ways. First, the matter of haste is not mentioned, rather the broader term ‘sin’. Secondly, the proverb is formed as a wellerism, a quotation proverb in which there is a statement, a speaker, and (often) an unusual circumstance,³⁰ a proverb structure very common in the

²⁵ For Guḡḡi Oromo see Unseth 2011, 433; for Allaaba see Unseth 2013, 461.

²⁶ Fekede Menuta 2014, 36.

²⁷ Avishur 1981, 38.

²⁸ Personal communication (2017).

²⁹ Tadesse Jaleta 2004, 85 and Tadesse Jaleta Jirata 2009, 50. The symbol <j> is used by multiple authors quoted in this article to represent a voiced affricate [dʒ].

³⁰ Mieder and Litovkina 2006, 20.

Horn of Africa.³¹ Additionally, this proverb specifies the number of the blind puppies as ‘nine’, ‘*sagal*’. In a Guḡgi riddle game about numbers, the standard answer for ‘eight’ is that it is the number of puppies in a litter, but in this proverb the number of puppies in the litter is larger, nine. This is significant because among the Guḡgi the ‘birth of a ninth child is believed to bring misfortune.’³²

The Guḡgi proverb shows clear signs of artistic efforts, including being formed with only two-syllable words, the two words of the quotation alliteratively beginning with *ma*-, sound similarities being heard in ‘*jette*’ and ‘*deettee*’, and sequences of vowel assonance.

Gurage

gijə mət’ jə-ft’əre barə-m; furt’ ʃʷənə-m³³
 bitch labour 3SgM-fast say-PST blind give.birth-PST³⁴
 ‘Saying give birth faster; a bitch gave birth to a blind puppy.’

In the Gurage proverb, we find a striking number of ejective *t’* and *ʃʷ*, here in bold: ‘gijə mət’ jə-ft’əre barə-m; furt’ ʃʷənə-m’. Also, note the sequences of vowel<ɾ>: ‘jəft’əre barə-m; furt’’. Also, the Gurage form of the proverb is a couplet, and both halves end with a rhyme of *-əm*. Additionally, remembering that Gurage is a Semitic language, where the consonants are psycholinguistically more prominent than the vowels, it is significant that the couplets, when we ignore the vowels, contain the similar consonantal sequences *ft’r* and *frt’*. Clearly, this Gurage proverb was formed artistically.

Allaaba

wússhət(i), daʔlansí batijŋŋíh(a) k’ook’á k’altáa³⁵
 dog-FEM be-quick extreme blind gave-birth
 ‘The she-dog, because she is in extreme hurry, gives birth to blind ones.’

³¹ Unseth et al. 2017, 23, 24.

³² Tadesse Berisso 2013, 59.

³³ Fekede Menuta 2014, 36.

³⁴ In Semitic languages of Ethiopia, it is common to use the verb ‘say’ to indicate intention. A clearer translation could be ‘Trying to give birth faster, a bitch gave birth to a blind puppy’.

³⁵ Schneider-Blum 2009, 95.

In Allaaba, the last two words have a pattern of alliteration of the ejective velar consonant, here in bold: ‘**k’ook’á k’altáa’**. Clearly, this is artistically crafted for the ear.

In addition to these three neighbouring languages in central Ethiopia—Guğgi Oromo, Allaaba, and Gurage—the proverb is also found in the Nuer language, spoken in far western Ethiopia and in South Sudan.

Nuer

ε pēēth εn min daap kε jiok kε pāāth diok kε
gaat tā ken nyien kien kueth (gaat ti coor)

it-is hurry SUB that give-birth ? dog with month three with
babies that NEG eyes their mature (babies that blind)

‘Because she rushed her pregnancy, that is why the dog gave birth in three months to the puppies whose eyes are not mature (blind babies).’

Looking for evidence of poetic structure in the Nuer form, the eight repetitions of the consonant *k* are striking. Also, the following seems artistic: ‘*jiok kε [...] diok kε*’.

This proverb, though reported to be new among the Nuer, has become established enough among them that a government official quoted the proverb to underline the need for patience when addressing a group of Nuer: ‘It is lack of patience, just after three months of pregnancy that makes [a] dog give birth to blind puppies.’³⁶ This is a wonderful use of the proverb in a context where proverbs are traditionally frequent, a call for patience and reconciliation.

Whether these language communities found in Ethiopia have borrowed the proverb or have created it, all have crafted forms of the proverb that contain verbal art.

Versions with a Hasty Cat instead of Dog

The oldest version of this proverb mentions a dog. Later versions of this proverb with a hasty cat instead of a dog are found in a number of places in Europe and also in Iraq. The proverbs from Ethiopia only have a dog, no examples have been found in the Horn of Africa with a cat. This leads to the question of which form of the proverb is original, the dog or the cat? A useful heuristic is taken from historical linguistics, where it has been devel-

³⁶ *Sudan Tribune* 2014.

oped as an axiom that older forms are usually preserved at the geographic periphery.³⁷ The dog is the animal found in the proverb in the geographic peripheries: Britain and Ethiopia. The Ethiopian data is important in showing that the dog form of the proverb is original.

Conclusion

The evidence presented here calls attention to the fact that this well-studied ancient proverb from Mesopotamia and Europe is also found in the Horn of Africa, outside of the previously documented regions in the Middle East and Europe. There have been ancient trade links between these regions, but the specifics of directions and how this proverb has spread are lost. However, links between Mesopotamia and Ethiopia were not limited to commercial trade, as is seen by the borrowing of a word from Mesopotamia into Gəʿəz for an astronomical term, a borrowing that was not via Greek.³⁸

This proverb data indicates that scholars should search for traces of this proverb in the regions between Mesopotamia and the Horn of Africa, as well as in additional languages in the Horn. This data from Ethiopia raises many more questions and calls for alertness among proverb scholars as they study proverbs from other languages in the region.

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³⁷ Hock 1986, 440.

³⁸ Lourié 2012.

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Summary

The world's oldest living proverb, from around 3,800 years ago, is found on a tablet from the Assyrian empire. The proverb has been documented from later eras, north-west from the Middle East up into Europe, as far north-west as Britain. Evidence is given here now demonstrating that the proverb is also found to the south of the Middle East, in Ethiopia. In some places, a cat is substituted for the dog, but the Ethiopian evidence indicates that the dog version of the proverb is original.