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WITH SPECIAL EMPHASIS ON THE HORN OF AFRICA

Analysis of some Bilin Proverbs

By

Kiflemariam Hamde 1989

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ANALYSIS OF SOME BILIN PROVERBS

by Kiflemariam Hamde*

Bilin is an Agew language spoken by the Bilin people in the district of Senhit (Keren), Northern Ethiopia. The Bilin people have preserved their native language and culture although they are surrounded by Tigre and Tigrinya speaking peoples.

The Bilin people, whose total population is estimated to be within the range of one hundred to one hundred and twenty thousand, are followers of Islam as well as Christianity.

The following proverbs constitute one of the linguistic and cultural heritages of the Bilin people. The descriptions following each proverb are not necessarily exact and complete but they give the general meaning attached to each of them.

The first nine proverbs are simple statements related to individual (2, 3, 7) and social (1, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9) relationships. In the remaining proverbs (10 - 14), two events or conditions are contrasted, expressing a causal relationship between individuals or events.

፩ ስነ-ዋሽዲ ቀሽፖ ለሽዲ ለኹ ገገ።

1. A fight among brothers is like straw which catches fire.

When straw catches fire, it burns rapidly with high flames, but it remains only for a short time and dies without trace of ashes or embers. In the same way, when brothers fight, it seems as though they could destroy each other but soon they are reconciled setting aside their differences easily and they start to discuss their future plans and affairs of life together. The fight does not leave any major element of misunderstanding. The logic of the proverb is that even if brothers seem to hate and oppose each other, it usually is not deep rooted and lasting; it is apparent that even if it may seem a real confrontation, it does not destroy their brotherhood and any good intentions they may have for each other remain untouched as straw fire does not leave any embers.

፪ ቱባላ እገገት ቱቡኩት።

2. Something in the lid, but nothing in the container.

The pot made of palm leaves where milk is kept and then processed is called ቱባ "tuba" in Bilin. Its small cover or lid is the ቱቡኩት "tubukut". The former is a container while the later is only a cover. The container may be many times larger than the cover, and milk is kept in it because of its big size and capacity to keep the milk well protected. Milk is taken out of the larger container in small amounts using the lid. Sometimes people keep their milk in the lid and put it in

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an open area where it can be seen by anybody who happens to come to that area. Usually it is in the lid that the milk is distributed rather than kept. This shows that the owner who keeps his milk in the lid is trying to show people that he has a lot of milk, while the truth is that it is the only milk he has.

This proverb is used in relation to the ownership of wealth. Some people who do not have much means for living put whatever insignificant wealth they may have on show for the public in order that other people would consider them as wealthy. In terms of social relationships, some people act as though they are socially acceptable while in reality they may be the most rejected ones. Such people could only attract the attention of newcomers.

፫፤ እባ ላ-ዕልደ ወስ ጅእላላ።

3. A well whose source is a single spring cannot water a herd of cattle.

The proverb is related to the fact that a limited source for any resource restricts the choice one may have in making a decision. A family depending on the income of only one of its members is restricted in its alternatives of choice. A farmer who sows only one type of seed depends on it so much that if any climatic change adversely affects the crop from that seed he will suffer greatly. That is, one type of seed is not as reliable as many types to face the problems encountered. An individual, in his traditional social circle, may have only a few relatives and he cannot, therefore, deal with other people as he would like because he does not have the wide range of social relations needed. This proverb is applied in a wide range of circumstances.

፬፤ እባ ንርሰውይል ጆርባገገገ።

4. A well should not depend on its pond.

A well is a water hole, the water coming from underground springs surrounding the well. Here pond means the place just beside the well, used as a drinking place for cattle. Water is taken out of the well and put into the pond so that cattle may drink comfortably. However, it is the well, and not the pond, which provides the water. The pond does not have a source of water apart from the well. It can only have water if the well has sufficient water. According to the proverb, the process is reversed. It is as if the well expects to get its water from its dependant, the pond. What if the pond gives water to the well? It is just an effect becoming a cause.

፩፤ ጠላይ እየኾኑ ለጉዳዩ ገብሰትኒ።

5. The provider of whole milk should not be denied whey; or
the provider of whole milk should not be denied skimmed milk.

Here whole milk means the milk which has been taken from a cow and not curdled. Skimmed milk has had its butter-fat removed and is of a lower quality than whole milk. The proverb then reads - the son of the provider of whole milk should not be denied the lower quality milk. If one becomes reluctant to give a good thing to the son (also other relatives) of a good man, one should at least, give him that which he despises himself. This applies in social relationships. The son of a respected person should be treated well, even if this is not on the same level as he could deserve, because he is a gentleman's son.

፪፤ አክረላ ያኾ ቂረብላ ጉድኩ።

6. He who desires success badly would not hesitate to plough at night.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to plough during the night. But for an ambitious person, there is no impossibility and darkness does not hinder him from farming as he has only one objective - his personal success. The Bilin people do not encourage over-ambition and thus the proverb is used to express their suspicion of this attitude. It also asserts that the problems faced in achieving personal goals are less easily overcome than those faced when a person is asked to do something good for others. For the over-ambitious person, there are no problems; he can farm his land even during the night. The logic is that if one alternative does not help in achieving one's personal ambitions, one will try all possible alternatives, even ridiculous ones, until he attains his objective.

፫፤ ቢደረላ ይጋኹ ኒውነትላ እቁ አሰላ።

7. He who desires his own well-being wouldn't pour water on his supper unless he chooses to do so.

Pouring water on one's supper is symbolic for worsening rather than ameliorating a situation one is in. But if one does what seems ridiculous to others and if he is doing it intentionally and deliberately, he is fully responsible and should never regret. One should bear the results of his acts, however dissatisfying they may be. He does it by himself without being compelled or forced, so he should not try to run away the consequences.

፳፫ ውራ ቁጥ ያሕሊ ይት ቁሊያ ኹ እንትጊኒት።

8. He who hasn't enough for himself doesn't need additional mouths to feed.

One can be useful and helpful to others only if he himself is self-sufficient and self-supporting. But, sometimes, people may ask for help and they make the mistake of asking the wrong people - those who are unable to help them anyway. The proverb does not apply, however, to relatives and dependants because, according to the Bilin culture, dependants should be supported responsibly and without complaint, under such circumstances.

፱፫ ጋብረኛ ኩኸር ከርኒ ሀንብረኛ ኩገና።

9. If you speak, let your father die; if you abstain from speaking, let your mother die; or

damned if you speak up, and damned also if you don't.

This is a dilemma. It is the same whether you speak (or do something) or do not speak (or do nothing). You cannot choose between your father and mother but whichever choice you make, the consequence is the same. These are both undesirable to you because no one chooses between his father and mother, especially regarding death.

Here, the proverb expresses the attitudes of people towards a person's actions. Criticism and an element of opposition will always be there whether you perform a certain action or not. Such a situation will not always be easy to neglect or bear. It may even be compared to the offering of the life of one of your parents, father or mother, whom you love from your inner heart and respect dutifully. It is the situation which the psychologists call 'Avoidance-Avoidance Approach'.

It is through such proverbs that the Bilin people, as any other society, express their attitude towards certain social relations and values. According to this proverb, therefore, if you do something, people will criticise and oppose you to a certain extent; if you do another, they will also not be silent as to what you should have done or not done. You may not be in a position to appreciate or support both consequences but, in any case, whatever you do be sure that you will be criticized. People's judgement should never hinder you from doing the alternative you choose as appropriate. For fear of people's criticism you should not stop doing this or that. Criticism will always be there.

**፲፫ ተከፋፍላል ለሕላውላላ፤
፪ ኹኹላል ለሰላ (አላላ)።**

10. As an artificial tooth cannot replace a natural one, advice cannot replace personal wisdom.

According to the first statement, an artificial tooth can never replace a natural one - a true statement. The second statement extends this truism to social interaction and inter-personal relationships. It asserts that whatever advice, assistance, or help you would give people could never replace common sense which the individual must have personally. That is, initiative and creativity cannot be given to a person by others. The artificial tooth can, of course, be of some help to a person whose natural tooth has been removed, but this is of limited service only and the beauty as well as the service it gives cannot be compared to that of a natural tooth. Again, the advice you give to people may help them to a certain extent, but as a mere external assistance, it cannot be assimilated into the individual's natural makeup as are initiative and creativity. These are personal features, not bestowed externally.

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ኹብ ለሰላረንክ ሰፍ (ፍደኩ)።**

11. If you pursue an argument you may end up in shedding blood;
if you churn milk you may get butter.

According to the first statement, you may be involved in processing arguments, speeches (rebukes, blames) and business which does not concern you. Analysing them to the last point only leads to quarrelling, hatred, and even murder. According to the second, you may be processing something good like milk - and you will get something good - butter, that is a rewarding result. So one should always be aware of where the action will lead: to a good output (result) if you are doing only what is appropriate to you; to evil results if you are inclined towards following, not your own concerns, but fancy cases such as gossips, other peoples interests, and the like. The consequence depends upon the things you are interested in.

Most of the time the Bilin people avoid cases and matters relating to court or political matters: sometimes lack of experience as how to handle these matters leads to blood-letting and opposition.

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ብታኹድ ኩካላ (እውግ)።**

12. Never share your secrets with a passerby;
and never give your meal to a satisfied person.

According to the Bilin culture, a passerby or a guest is not the appropriate one to pass your secret to; it is useless to tell him either your secrets or your personal affairs because he cannot be of any help. Even worse, he may keep the secret only to reveal it to whosoever meets him on the way back home. Maybe this is your enemy, so you should accept the guest only as such, no more, no less.

According to the second statement, to share whatever you may have with someone is of use only if he needs it. Otherwise you lose, as he does not require it because he is already satisfied. Sharing ones meal with others is a respected custom in Bilin tradition. You do not prepare for him a separate meal because this does not fulfill the social element of respect and honour you have towards people.

The passerby is not an appropriate one to discuss your matters with just as a satisfied person is not an appropriate one to share your meal with.

**፲፻፲ ጋብ ጀረብኹ ጋብባላ፤
ካንጀረብኹ ካንባላ።**

13. He who habitually likes argument can always get one;
as the one who searches for wood does not return empty handed.

The first statement is similar to that in No. 11. But here it expresses the fact that one can be involved in cases and personal matters only if he is willing to do so. In the same way if one wants wood for some purpose he has to get it. Somehow he must get what he wants - by hook or by crook.

The central value of this proverb is the act of will. Involving oneself in undesired activities, can be justified only if the individual is willing to do it deliberately.

**፲ ፱፻ ደበርሰ ሰኝ ረደቃኹ ኩእንሺን አኸጊኒ፤
ከርተ ሰኝ ቢራሽ ኩውሀር አኸጊኒ።**

14. Never be a son-in-law of a person who is newly rich;
and never have a bull which broke its leg to service your herd.

The first is a situation which advises you to avoid marrying a lady whose father was in abject poverty but now has suddenly become wealthy. The second is a situation where a bull which had a broken leg before, has now recovered, but you abhor the possibility of it becoming the male head of your cattle.

In both cases, there is a possibility of a better life. In the first case, the newly wealthy man is in a better economic and social status, so much so that he will definitely change his behaviour and social class. So if you marry his daughter he may not respect you but just consider you as a servant.

The logic of the proverb is that being wealthy and of a higher social class affects one's behaviour and social relationships; it also shows that being wealthy needs some experience. One who has recently made a fortune forgets his previous poverty and lower dignity, so much so that he feels unnecessarily proud and prestigious.

The bull with a broken leg might probably be kicked and pushed aside by the cattle so that when it becomes the dominant one it may forcefully and unnecessarily disturb the cattle.

Note:

Kiflemeriam Hamde, "The Origin and Development of Bilin", sponsored by IAS, AU, 1986, p. 36 (mimeo)