CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE PRESENT-DAY ARABIC PROVERB AS A TESTIMONY TO THE SOCIAL HISTORY OF THE MIDDLE EAST

Societies bound by a rigid tradition of fixed moral and religious notions and comprising a large percentage of illiterate persons usually possess a great treasure of proverbs and popular sayings, particularly if they are endowed with a rich and expressive language. The Arabic-speaking countries represent a most conspicuous example of such a society. Many thousands of modern Arabic proverbs have been collected by both European and Arab scholars in the countries of the Middle East and North Africa, and anyone acquainted with the facts will concede that the material is far from being exhausted.

The meritorious "Critical Bibliography of Spoken Arabic Proverb Literature" by Charles A. Ferguson and John M. Echols, published in 1952, gives an idea of the rich harvest which already has been gathered. Important additional contributions have been made in this field since the publication of that survey. The following examples may suffice to illustrate the nature and scope of the work done thus far.

For the western end of the Arabic world we have Mohammed Ben Cheneb’s three volumes of Algerian and other Maghribi proverbs and sayings, altogether 3127 items arranged in alphabetical order. In addition to the wealth of material collected, this book is especially useful because of its many cross references both to modern Arabic proverbs used in countries other than the Maghrib and in particular to those found in classical Arabic literature. Of an entirely different nature is a collection of 2013 proverbs from Tangier and other places in Morocco, published by the eminent anthropologist E. Westermarck with the aid of a local scholar. They are classified by subject

1 *Journal of American Folklore*, vol. 65, number 255, quoted here as Ferguson-Echols. This bibliography, which is classified by countries, with a concluding general chapter, contains solely studies which have appeared in the languages of western Europe, not those published in Arabic. For the latter, cf. C. Brockelmann, *El* s.v. Mathal.

and introduced by a detailed and highly instructive essay on the Arabic proverb in general. There exist many other collections for the area stretching from Morocco to Libya, some of which are particularly valuable because they are confined to certain localities, social groups or communities.

The numerous publications on the modern Egyptian material were notably inaugurated by the famous Swiss traveller J.L. Burckhardt, who included in his collection of 999 proverbs—a number favorite with the Arabs—a smaller one made about a hundred years before him by a local savant. It is significant that Burckhardt found many items listed by his predecessor no longer in use at his time.

Of the books printed in Arabic characters mention should be made of the *Colloquial Proverbs* by the excellent Egyptian scholar Ahmad Taymiir! and of Madame Faiqa Rafiq’s huge collection, which if continued and completed with the same extensiveness as the volumes published thus far, might well comprise more than ten thousand items. Egypt is especially rich in popular wisdom, a fact due no doubt to the natural inclination of the Egyptians for fun and jesting, as Mme. Rafiq rightly observes. Rural Egypt is represented by proverbs from the Menufeyya district, listed together with other ethnographic and dialect material collected under the supervision of


2 E.g. Louis Brunot, "Proverbes et dictons arabes de Rabat", *Hesperis* 8 (1929), pp. 59-121. Of the two hundred items of this collection, according to Ferguson-Echols, not a single one appears in Ben Cheneb.

3 J.L. Burckhardt, *Arabic Proverbs: or The Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*, London 1830. Between the conclusion of the book in March 1817 (in Cairo) and its publication after the author's death, a part of the manuscript was lost, so that only a total of 782 items remained. Most of those marked as no longer in use were of the more abstract and literary type (e.g. nos. 49, 59, 77, 117-9, 131, 704), but some also were real, popular sayings (e.g. 371 and 506). At least two of those described as obsolete, nos. 55 and 76, are still in use in the twentieth century.

4 *Al-Amthal al-rAmmiyya*, Cairo 1949, second edition 1956. The author died in 1930, but this, like a number of his other works, was printed posthumously. The collection contains 3188 items.

5 *Haddt'aq al-Amthal al-vAmmiyya*. The second volume, the last seen by the present writer, appeared in 1943.