CHAPTER FOUR

MORE RURAL THAN URBAN? THE RELIGIOUS CONTENT AND FUNCTIONS OF HAUSA PROVERBS AND HAUSA VERBAL COMPOUNDS

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1. Introduction

The Hausa language is rich in proverbs and verbal compounds (compound words containing a verb). Such phrases are in frequent use and illustrate both the worldviews and material culture of the Hausa people. Many of these proverbs and compounds are found in Bargery’s dictionary (1934) and, assuming that a good number of his informants were about 50 years old when he compiled his dictionary, many of these phrases are at least 125 years old. This paper looks at the religious content and functions of Hausa proverbs and verbal compounds.

For most if not the whole of the last millennium, Islam had a huge influence on Hausa society; and while the assumption in West Africa that, if you speak Hausa you are a Muslim, is, strictly speaking, inaccurate, it is not unfounded. Only a small percentage of Hausa are Christians and an even smaller percentage are aña or maguzawa (‘pagans’). I suggest here that Hausa proverbs and verbal compounds contain traces of the animistic, pagan religion.

Many Hausa proverbs (Hausa: karin magana ‘folding.of speech’) refer to material culture, but they are used to give advice or express judgment on social and moral issues, and thus have a frame of reference which is closely linked to religion. Verbal compounds (Hausa: adon magana ‘adornment.of speech’) are often used to name everyday flora, fauna and objects and do not directly comment on social issues or offer moral advice. Nevertheless, they name social roles or behaviour as well as illnesses and their remedies, the latter sometimes being magic charms. Social roles and behaviour, as well as charms, frequently imply religious belief, because what counts as ‘proper conduct’
is mediated by religious ideology. Thus verbal compounds also have a religious component.¹

Proverbs and verbal compounds are an excellent example of how language transmits culture, often retaining phrases from a previous era. In our own culture (as in Hausa) the sun still ‘rises’ and ‘sets’ despite the fact that, some four hundred years ago, physicists established that the earth revolves around the sun! The fact that such phrases can transmit an older culture is due to what Keane (1997: 63) calls ‘…internal cohesion… [which is] perceived to remain constant across contexts.’ Interestingly, Keane is referring here to religious language. The ‘internal cohesion’ of Hausa proverbs and verbal compounds is achieved by the fact that they are succinct phrases and that they typically have a binary structure (described for each in the relevant section, below); thus these phrases are commonly used, survive over time and transmit culturally important information.

Proverbs and verbal compounds seem to belong in that category of ‘…word [or] slogan… which help to create the social order’ (Bourdieu 1991: 129–130) and can be discussed in terms of Bourdieu’s notion of ‘habitus’. In his introduction to Bourdieu (1991), J. B. Thompson, the editor, defines ‘habitus’ as ‘…a set of dispositions which incline agents to act and react in certain ways… generat[ing] practices, perceptions and attitudes which are ‘regular’ without being consciously co-ordinated or governed by any ‘rule’…’ (1991: 12). Thompson (1991: 12–13) suggests that these ‘…dispositions… are capable of generating a multiplicity of practices and perceptions in fields other than those in which they were originally acquired.’ (my emphasis)

This shift from one field to another is directly relevant to proverbs and verbal compounds: superficially, the words found in a proverb or verbal compound may have little or nothing to do with moral or social issues; however their application is often precisely in this field (see Bichi 1997). Thus the rather banal proverb Ran wanka, ba a boyen cibiya! (On bath-day, one can’t hide the navel) can be applied in contexts which have nothing to do with bathing. For instance, when students take an exam, what they have learned will come to light. The verbal compound hana-salla (‘prevent prayer’) has, on the surface, nothing to

¹ The source of the proverbs analysed here is Kirk-Greene (1966), who lists, translates and comments on 500 Hausa proverbs. The verbal compounds examined here are taken from a corpus of some 960 verbal compounds, collected by many authors and collated in McIntyre (2006: 3–4; 263–336).