

## An Annotation of Selected Hausa Parallel Proverbs

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**Abstract:** Proverbs which are described as short pit paltry or useful sayings which have been accepted into current speech and writing expressing either moral truth, embodying precepts or useful moral or didactic lessons. Proverbs have also served as medium for the expression of commonly accepted views. The Hausa term for proverb is “*Karin Magana*” and they are one of the oldest and most important genres of folklore, which form part and parcel of Hausa culture. These wise sayings form a very important aspect of the ways of life of the people who use them. They are capable of a variety of meanings depending on the way the speakers and listeners understand them. The effect of proverbs on the populace depends on the aptness with which they are employed in a given situation and on the themes, styles, and forms of words with which they are dressed. The same proverb can also be used under different situations. Thus two or more proverbs that are similar in context can be used for the same situation at any given time or place. It is therefore the intention of this paper to annotate a set of parallel Hausa proverbs with the hope of analyzing their meaning in context and the situation in which they are applicable or can be used.

**Key words:** proverbs, parallels, Hausa, translation

### 1. Introduction

Proverbs are wise sayings; which form an essential part of the experience and way of life of the people who produce them. The Hausa term for proverb is *Karin Magana* which Skinner (1980, pp. 2–3) defines as sentences which a group of Hausa people agree is a *Karin Magana*. The *Karin Magana* is not different from the English proverbs but it is more inclusive than the English proverb.

Proverbs are capable of a variety of meanings according to how and when they are used and the fact that a proverb occurs under a particular heading is not in itself a reason to limiting the application of that proverb to that theme alone. Proverbs demand consideration on the part of those who use and hear them; and a judgment on whether a particular proverb has been used correctly and effectively; “it is this interactive effort involving sharp-witted analysis and judgment, which can make a proverb in the mouth of a skilled proverbist a verbal art of great fitness” (Ibekwe 1998, p. 2). Therefore in considering the effective use of proverbs we believe that a situation may be appropriate for more than one proverb. It is thus the intention of this paper to annotate a set of parallel proverbs with the hope of analyzing their meanings in context and the situations in which they are applicable or can be applied.

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## 2. Methodology

Sets of similar proverbs are listed first in the original text. This is followed closely by the translation. In translating the original text from Hausa to English, we adopted what Usman (2003, p. 3) calls “the close/free or literal translation methods”. The advantage being that this method captures the meaning and expression of the original vernacular text in terms of grammar and context even though we admit that the translations are mere equivalents to the real translation of the original text.

The translations are then followed by the annotation of the proverbs that is to say the meaning of the proverbs and the situations or social context in which the set of proverbs can be cited or used is highlighted. This is because; one needs to ask not only for proverbs what counts as a proverb, but also for information as to other components of the situations in which proverbs are used. What are the rules governing who can use proverbs or particular proverbs, and to whom? What exactly are the contributing contextual factors, which make the use of proverbs or a particular proverb, possible or not possible, appropriate or inappropriate (Arewa & Dundes, 1964)?

## 3. Proverbs and Parallels

“Proverbs are wise sayings or compositions intended to give credence and intelligent support to assertions and discussions” (Na’Allah, 1994, p. 104); they are often used to check the cultural excesses of a group; they aim to advice, rebuke or suggest. Proverbs relate to the day-day lives of the people who produce and use them; their aspiration, morality, religion, history, thinking, expectation; in short, everything about their world views. The use of proverb is therefore seen in the total life pattern of the Hausa people from entertainment to games to very serious issues.

What is worth noting though is that the images that are presented in the proverbs are culturally defined and they may differ from culture to culture, society to society and sometimes from generations to generation. Generally, Hausa proverbs tend to add colour to the linguistic process of a speaker. This is why most proverbs have particular situations in which they are most appropriately used. A situation may be appropriate for more than one proverb, which brings us to the issue of parallel proverbs in Hausa.

Parallels are elements of equal importance which are expressed in similar grammatical forms” (Emeaba, 1987, p. 143); they could also be “a connection between two things” (Longman, 2001, p. 1026) or things that are very similar. Viewed thus, one could deduce that parallel proverbs are proverbs that are similar to each other in context, meaning or situations. It is in this context that we would display an anthology of parallel Hausa proverbs with a view to annotating them as literally as possible.

**Proverb:** Ina ruwa ya ci makadi, kina ganga ya jike

**Translation:** While I am lamenting that the drummer is drowned, you are there complaining that the drum is wet.

**Proverb:** Ina ga yaki kina ga kura

**Translation:** While I am lamenting that a fierce battle is on, you are complaining of the dust raised by the battle.

**Proverb:** Ina raba ki da kiwon kella kina akuya ta haihu

**Translation:** While I am trying to prevent you from rearing a he goat, you are there telling me that the female goat has been delivered of an off spring.

**Analysis**

Everyone has individual priorities. Thus one man's food could be another man's poison because what could be of importance to one person may not be to another. But still there are important issues as well as there are trivial issues. The former are those that are considered important and need immediate attention and are discussed immediately. Thus, if a person decides to pay more attention to issues that are considered generally trivial and less important, any of these proverbs could be used to caution or bring such a person to order.

**Proverb:** Abin nema ya samu wai matar falke ta haifi dan jaki

**Translation:** What is sought for has been gotten for the itinerant trader's wife has delivered a donkey. (One needs not look elsewhere for a donkey to carry load).

**Proverb:** Abin nema ya samu wai matar dan sanda ta haifi *barawo*

**Translation:** What is sought for has been gotten; the policeman's wife has delivered a thief. (One needs not look elsewhere to find a thief to arrest).

**Analysis**

When one is looking for something which he/she considers important and out of the blues that thing is given free then one is saved the trouble of going out or leaving his/her surrounding's to find that things. Just as the itinerant trader seeks for the donkey so also the policeman seeks for a thief to arrest. Therefore if the trader's wife can put to bed a donkey and the policeman's wife can put to bed a thief what else would they be looking for outside when they have it right there in their homes. Thus just as the context suggests, these proverbs could be used to congratulate one who unexpectedly gets what he/she has been seeking for long.

**Proverb:** In ka ga rakumi ka ga buzu

**Translation:** When you see the camel you must also see the Tureq

**Proverb:** In ka ga wata ka ga Zara

**Translation:** When you see the moon, you must also see the big star guiding it

**Analysis**

These proverbs are equivalent to the English "Birds of the same feather flock together. Thus the camel is never seen alone but with the tureq who guides it to where it must go just like the moon is guided by the big star known as Zara that illuminate its path.

These proverbs are used to emphasize the closeness of two things/people.

**Proverb:** Ana kukan targade sai ga kariya ta samu

**Translation:** Just when we were complaining of a dislocation then suddenly a fracture was detected

**Proverb:** Ana kukan ba'a koshi ba sai ga baki sun zo.

**Translation:** We were complaining that we were still hungry and suddenly visitors show up

**Analysis**

Just when one is complaining about simple issues/happening, more serious ones are detected; more serious to be handled or contained. Looking at the first proverb, one can agree that a dislocation is not as serious as a fracture, but before the dislocation could even be treated a fracture is detected. What else is expected of a hungry person who receives important guests who need to be fed? Definitely one will be in a dilemma of how to handle the situation. Thus, when one suddenly finds him/her self in a very difficult situation or dilemma one could use this proverb to lament over the predicament.

**Proverb:** Komai nisan jifa kasa ta yi

**Translation:** Whatever goes up must come down

**Proverb:** Komai nisan dare gari zai waye

**Translation:** No matter how long the night the day will break/dawn will surely break

**Analysis**

Both proverbs mean that no matter how long it takes everything has an end. These proverbs are used to uphold and stress the value of patience. No matter the hardship if one exercise patience it would come to an end. Thus with patience, anything could be achieved just as the stone thrown up would gradually slide down or the night never continues but surely ends in day break/dawn.

These proverbs could be used to emphasize or stress the value of patience.

**Proverb:** Abokin barawo, barawo ne

**Translation:** The friend of a thief is a thief

**Proverb:** Zama da madaukin kanwa ke sa farin kai/gashi

**Translation:** Being in the company of the potash carrier makes one have a dusty/grey head/hair.

**Analysis**

These proverbs suggest that the habit of a person can affect those in his company. Adversely the proverbs also suggest that for you to know much about a person, study or look at the characters of the company he keeps because one way or the other he or she would be affected by the people around him/her.

These proverbs could be used to caution or warn a person to be careful of the company he keeps especially if they are known to be of negative characters; for he or she could be judged according to their behaviours.

**Proverb:** In bera na da sata daddawa ma na da wari

**Translation:** If the rat steals, then the locust bean cake also has an attractive smell.

**Proverb:** In an bi ta barawo a bi ta mabi sawu

**Translation:** If you go after the thief then also follow those after him.

**Analysis**

Just like two wrongs do not make a right so also a single person cannot always be wrong. This is similar to what the English man term as “there are two sides to a coin” or “it takes two to tango”. These proverbs could be used to show that blames should be accorded justly for any deed. No side should be ignored or favoured so as not to cause disaffection.

**Proverb:** Wayayyar hauka, haukar rike min da na in daki dan Wani.

**Translation:** Civilized madness, the madness of take care of my child while I beat up another’s child.

**Proverb:** Dan zumu kashe shi da aiki, in ka samu dukiya ba naka.

**Translation:** Exhaust the child of a relative with work but if you get wealth give to your child.

**Analysis**

This is a case of a fool proving to be wise, in fact so wise as to consider others foolish. This is because a person hides and values what belongs to him/her and tend to misuse other peoples things. These proverbs could be used to portray someone as not only cunning but also selfish and unrealistic.

**Proverb:** Ga fili, ga mai doki

**Translation:** Here is the field; and here is the horse rider.

**Proverb:** Ga goshi ga alkibla sai maki sallah

**Translation:** Here is the forehead; and here is the east

**Analysis**

These proverbs seek to suggest that both the atmosphere and situation are conducive for the act proposed unless one has suddenly developed cold feet. A rider on the horseback is offered the field, which has enough space for him to gallop, and is expected to go ahead and ride without hesitation. So also a Muslim who considers himself devoted is offered a forehead to (prostrate) in prayer and is shown the direction (east). Both would surely or are expected to use the opportunity offered unless they are unserious. These proverbs could be used to challenge and also taunt someone who has made an empty threat or to call off his bluff.

**Proverb:** Duk daya matacce ya karya

**Translation:** It all amounts to the same thing if the corpse indeed has a fracture

**Proverb:** Da ran mai sabulu da mutuwar ta duk daya ga balbela; don me? Don kuwa tana da farinta.

**Translation:** The cattle egret should not be bothered whether the seller of soap/detergent is alive or dead since it is already fair feathered.

**Analysis**

The fracture sustained by the dead body (corpse) would not make any difference to it because it has no more feelings; so also the cattle egret will be least bothered if the soap seller remains alive or is dead because it is already white and nothing can change that fact. Even if it is stained by dirt it could always be washed off.

These proverbs could be used to show a person's stand on certain issues or lack of concern. They show the acceptability of any situation one finds him/herself.

**Proverb:** Komai lalacewar masa, ta fi kashin shanu

**Translation:** No matter how stale the fried rice cake (masa) is, it is worth more than cow dung.

**Proverb:** Koda goma ta lalace, tafi biyar albarka

**Translation:** Even when ten became worthless, it is still better off than five

**Proverb:** Karamin goro yafi babban dutse

**Translation:** A tiny piece of kola nut is better off than a very big stone

**Analysis**

These proverbs suggest that the worthlessness of lost glory is still better than the assumed glory of a worthless object. One cannot just compare some things with others no matter how big that thing may be. Thus their glories are still upheld with dignity.

These proverbs could be used to clearly indicate differences in social status. It could also be used to suggest that whatever is yours could be depended on than what isn't.

**Proverb:** Kwai a baka ya fi kaza a akurki

**Translation:** An egg in the mouth is worth more than a chicken in the cage

**Proverb:** Abu ga hannu shi ne mutum

**Translation:** An item in the hand is what makes one a person.

### Analysis

Both these proverbs are equivalent to the English proverbs “A bird in hand is worth two in the bush”. Meaning that having something personal to one, no matter how little is better than an imagined expectation of something big which is out of reach and which one may never possess.

These two proverbs could be used to advice on being contented with what one has no matter how small. In other words, these proverbs caution against over ambition, which could lead to a person’s downfall.

**Proverb:** Sannu ke kashe zane ba yawan dauri ba

**Translation:** Steadiness is what tears a wrapper and not the number of times it is tied or worn.

**Proverb:** Sannu bata hana zuwa sai dai a dade ba’a kai ba.

**Translation:** Slow and steady will not deter one from reaching one’s destination. It will only take one longer to get there.

### Analysis

Both proverbs are equivalent to the English “slow and steady wins the race”. These proverbs suggest that steadiness is what is required to achieve success in life rather than quickness, which may be characterized by disorganization. Thus, one who is steadfast and careful, will surely get to achieve an ambition or goal, or will reach one’s destination.

They could both be used to uphold the virtue of steadfastness and patience rather than being rash, which normally comes with dire consequences.

**Proverb:** Taura biyu basu taunuwa a baka

**Translation:** Two taura (a kind of fruits with wide seeds) seeds cannot be chewed in the mouth at the same time.

**Proverb:** Ba’a damisa biyu a wuri, ko an yi guda ke daukan girma

**Translation:** No two leopards can stay in one place and even if they do, one has to assume leadership.

### Analysis

Two kings cannot rule the same kingdom at the same time; one has to give way for the other to rule; just as two strong willed persons cannot live harmoniously in a place without one imposing his will upon the other.

These proverbs are used to praise a ruler or a leader who can impose his will decisively and ensure compliance. They could also be used to mock a weaker person who feels he/she can call the leader’s bluff.

**Proverb:** Ba’a magaji da yaro

**Translation:** A child cannot become an elder overnight

**Proverb:** Ba’a wane bakin banza

**Translation:** People of substance are worth much more than one can imagine

### Analysis

Only those who have achieved something in life are worth emulation or praise. Anyone who wants to be recognized must have to do something of real worth to be considered successful. These proverbs could be used to caution or mock someone who insists on being upheld or recognized when he has done nothing worthy of commendation.

**Proverb:** Samu ya fi iyawa; kuturu da zobensa

**Translation:** To own is better than to know how; a leper with a ring.

**Proverb:** Samu yafi iyawa; hawan dokin maciji

**Translation:** To own is better than to know how; a snake riding on a horse back.

**Analysis**

Surely to own something is better than to just know how to operate the thing. The owner of a thing can boast of owning that thing even if he cannot operate it. The person with the knowledge of how to operate a thing cannot boast of owning it. Whatever he/she lay his/her hand on is just temporary.

These proverbs are used in ironical situations and can be used to mock backbiters and negative critics of a thing/person.

**Proverb:** A bar kaza cikin gashin ta

**Translation:** Leave the chicken with its feather (do not pluck the chicken)

**Proverb:** In ana cin baure, a bar tonon cikin ta.

**Translation:** When eating baure (a fruit) do not ever look at the inside

**Analysis**

Both proverbs are similar to the English “let sleeping dogs lie”: meaning let things be the way they are and one should not attempt investigating matters that are better left hidden. Just as the chicken looks better in its feather as against when it is plucked and you behold its ugly sight, e.g., tick etc, so also does the baure look beautiful and juicing outwardly but its seed or insides looks unpleasant, ridden in most cases with maggots. These proverbs are used most often to advice people to leave issues as they are, for undue investigation could open up a can of worms that could also consume one.

**Proverb:** Zancen ka ke so; karuwa taji mai wa’azi

**Translation:** The topic seems to be of interest to you if not, why preaching to a prostitute.

**Proverb:** Zancen ka keso an ce da gwaro ina iyali

**Translation:** The topic seems to be of interest to you If not, why asking after a bachelor’s family?

**Analysis**

These proverbs adversely indirectly suggest that all effort to correct a thing or situation is lost and one seems to be wasting his/her time in talking. One knows definitely that a prostitute would hardly concentrate and listen to an advice given by a preacher just like it would be a wasted effort asking a bachelor how his family is faring knowing fully well that he has none.

These proverbs could be used to caution or pacify anyone who keeps failing in his/her attempt to change the undesirable or negative happenings in society.

#### 4. Conclusions

From the foregoing discussions and analysis, one can see that to the Hausa people proverbs serve as an avenue for transmitting knowledge, attitudes and values which are often expressed metaphorically. Through the annotation of the parallel proverbs we have done, one clearly sees that variations do occur in the text, sometimes even dialectical differences are found but the conclusion to be given here is that the general idea in parallel proverbs are similar which adversely make the meanings of and the situations for using the proverbs also similar.

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