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TOWARD AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF HAUSA RIDDLING *

INTRODUCTION

This paper was stimulated (1) by my own interest in Hausa ethnolinguistics and (2) by a paper by Professor Lee Haring of Brooklyn College, presented at the African Studies Association meetings in Philadelphia November, 1972. The former — my interest in Hausa ethnolinguistics — has stimulated me to study anthropologically a number of types of Hausa folklore including fables, proverbs, epithets and now riddles. The Haring paper then, led me to ask a series of questions concerning the riddling process itself, the freedom or lack of freedom of the participants in the process, the fixity of the answers, etc.

My own experience with Hausa and with Hausa riddling goes back to 1957 when I began to learn and to teach the language in Northern Nigeria. As a pleasant part of the learning and teaching process I was able, on occasion, to induce my informants to engage in the mock warfare that riddling becomes in Hausaland. The dialog goes something like this:

One says, „Here it is, here it is here.” (This is the formulaic sentence introducing a fable or a riddle).

The reply is, „Let it come, let it pass by”, or „Let it come so we can hear it”.

„Okay”, the riddler answers, „my father is in the hut, his beard is outside”.

The hearers ponder what the riddler could be alluding to. If they hesitate the riddler asks, „Do you give me the town?” The

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analogy is to the conquest of a town in warfare. The riddler is asking his hearers to acknowledge his ability in the mock warfare of riddling by surrendering to him a town.

If the hearers are stumped they will say, „Okay, we give you a town”. Then the riddler may say, „Okay, give me Kano” (the largest Northern Nigerian city). The hearers will likely refuse to „give” him such a prestigious prize but will instead offer, say, Bauchi or another such town of higher prestige than Bauchi but of less prestige than Kano, will laugh good naturedly over the whole process and the riddler will say,

„Fire and smoke”. That is, the „old man” inside the hut represents the fire that frequently burns inside the grass-roofed huts of rural Hausaland. The smoke, then, filters up through the grass roof and is likened to the old man’s beard.

Then one of the others may give the formula,

„Here it is, here it is here.”

„Let it come, let it pass by.”

„One path splits into two.”

One of the hearers may reply, „A pair of pants.” The riddler then says, „Okay, you’ve conquered the town.”

And so it goes.

ON KNOWING THE ANSWER

In his paper surveying riddling with particular reference to Africa, Haring raises the question, „is the person to whom the riddle is posed really expected to guess the answer?” („On Knowing the Answer”, draft pp. 1—2). Haring’s answer is, „no.” He says,

Most Western-educated people assume that he is, but I believe he is not. African riddling is more like a catechism than a creative inquiry. Usually in African riddles the association of the question and answer (or precedent and sequent) is fixed by tradition and popular acceptance (p. 2).

Haring’s point is that the overall cultural context in which riddling participates demands that the answer be learned with the riddle. And he supports his contention fairly well, I think, for the majority of the cases in which riddling takes place in the African contexts to which he alludes.

He states, for example, that in his recording of Akamba riddles he

saw no hint that any invention was taking place. Rather the informants, a lively group of children and adolescents, took delight in sharing with me the outsider a body of material which they seemed to recognize as a distinct cultural product. While eager to display their knowledge, they were neither competing nor guessing any answers (p. 3).

Haring scores Lyndon Harries (*The Riddle in Africa*, „Journal of American Folklore” 84, 1971, 377—93) for giving the impression that the riddler invents his riddles and poses them to his audience with the expectation that they will not be able to guess the answer. „But”, says Haring,

what of the situation in which an African poses a riddle to someone else which he has not invented himself? Surely this is the basic performance situation which many investigators have observed and recorded ... Simply by weight of probability, most African riddling must consist of the exchange of fixed pairs of questions and answers which have not been invented by the speakers but which they are remembering (p. 3).

Likewise, according to Haring and, in this case a student of Finnish and Melanesian riddling named Maranda, the hearer of the riddle is not expected to be creative in his answer. For even though due to „the greater applicability and fertility of certain metaphors” a given „riddle image” could conceivably elicit several answers, it is not expected or usually allowed that the hearer will invent an answer during the riddling session. Rather, according to Maranda

*both the image and the answer are coded, and ... the main intellectual effort in a riddling situation consists of a quick scanning of the coded message to discover the answer rather than of an intellectual effort to invent a novel answer. In this sense, riddling is always closer to an academic test than to creative research (Elli K. Maranda, *The Logic of Riddles* (in:) P. and E. K. Maranda, *Structural Analysis of Oral Tradition*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971, p. 196).*

„But”, continues Haring,

riddlers do not simply repeat traditional items; rather, having learned the rules of folkloric competence, which are analogous to the rules of linguistic competence, they perform riddles according to those rules. Correctness then means

not exact repetition but conformity to folkloric rules which are implicitly understood by all members of the folk group (pp. 6—7).

However, even when alternative answers are a possibility according to the rules, the riddler is likely to accept only that answer that he himself has in mind at the time. As my latest Hausa informant (Abba Kano) replied when I asked him about alternative answers — „the riddler will only accept the answer he has decide upon”. He may, though, admit (at least to himself) that another answer given by a hearer is a good one and may on a future occasion hold his hearers accountable for the latter answer rather, than the one he expected on the first occasion.

According to Haring, though,

The right answer is a password for admission to the group of those who know; one's ingenuity in devising alternatives may be commendable, but it doesn't guarantee entry. Only the right answer does. The catechumen may be able to think up better answers than the ones expected — he may even form them into an alternative theology — but that won't get him confirmed (p. 8).

This point is supported and elaborated upon by John Messenger in his study of riddling among the Anang Ibibio of Nigeria (*Ananag Proverb-Riddlers*, Journal of American Folklore, 73, 1960). He states that riddling is not engaged in with the intent of „baffling an audience and stimulating its members to provide correct answers” but, rather, for the purpose of enjoyment that „derives from the sharing of [riddling] by members of a group” (p. 226). This is not a competitive thing, then, but a participatory thing engaged in primarily by those who know for their own enjoyment and for the indoctrination of those who don't (primarily younger children) into the knowledge of those who know. For

older children and adults know most of the existing ntan, and when one is invented, its originator divulges the appropriate reply along with the question or initial statement rather than asking for possible solutions (Messenger, p. 226).

When, then, one gets to be a „knower” of the riddles, both the question and the answer parts, he passes, as if from one grade of school to another, from the status of „outsider” to that of „insider”. Then,

Hearing the same riddles later in life, the riddler is reminded of childhood days and is reinforced in his sense of unity with the group. The Anang pattern prohibits the competitive or aggressive use of riddles but encourages their use to promote group solidarity (Haring, p. 10 after Messenger, p. 227).

RIDDLES AS CATECHISM FOR HAUSA CHILDREN

There is no doubt in my mind that Haring is right in seeing riddles as a part of the catechism that the uninitiated in an African society are expected to simply learn. And as I study the Hausa riddles with their fixed answers I find myself at innumerable points being introduced to characteristically Hausa perspectives on reality that to me are absolutely fascinating. Though in a sense, both the Hausa child and I come to the riddles as outside the system, the Hausa child as he learns cannot be nearly as fascinated as I am, because he has no alternative perspective on reality to compare these analogies to. Nor can I be as thoroughly conditioned by the Hausa system as he is, since I have been indoctrinated first into another perspective on reality.

I here briefly illustrate certain of the aspects of the Hausa catechism that come through riddling. I have reversed the order in which the riddle and its answer are given to focus on the thing learned rather than the way in which it is learned:

A. *Body parts* — a considerable number of riddles deal with the body and its parts

1. Fingernails are seen as
 - (a) a little bow behind an anthill (i.e. finger)
 - (b) a lovely thing in a grove of trees
2. Shadow
 - (a) my brother who travels with me but whom I can't hear moving
 - (b) the one who accompanies a full moon
3. Arm/hand — trusty slave, whatever comes my way he will protect me
4. Teeth
 - (a) white roosters on a fence (the gums)
 - (b) a stump hard to pull out
5. Hair — my farm that grows up very quickly after I harvest (shave) it

6. Ears

- (a) my father goes around the hut, my mother does the same but they don't meet
- (b) something of mine that is older than my grandfather
- (c) my father's twins — he turns around but they don't meet each other

7. Tongue — its sharpness is greater than that of a sword

8. The Back — we're always together but I can't see it

9. Snot — you always try to get it to return but it keeps showing itself

10. Eyes

- (a) They like strangers but they refuse/hate strangers
- (b) my marsh that is always full of water
- (c) two stallions that are always running out of sight and then returning
- (d) tireless messengers: if you send them now, immediately they'll return
- (e) my boy who will not mind — he will not stay put
- (f) two good friends: no matter how rough the river they'll cross it

B. *Fauna, insects*

1. Dog — I've given it to you, why are you still staring at me?
2. Dog's nose — I washed my bowl clean and put it in the sun to dry, but it didn't dry
3. Doves — the girls of our house don't go to the bush without clapping their hands
4. Scorpion — God gave him a saddle but I won't mount it
5. Guinea Fowl
 - (a) crease after crease, the body cloth (given by) God
 - (b) he has woven a speckled dish cover
6. Chicken — my girlfriend who eats, wipes her mouth and says nobody gave her anything
7. Blind horse — when they try to sell it everyone refuses to buy
8. Harvester ants — a thousand cattle travel without raising any dust

9. Butterfly — teacher open your book

10. Hedgehog — a little ball in the midst of the corn

C. *Flora*

1. Cotton — I went to the bush, the bush laughed at me
2. Shade of a Palm Tree — the one close to this shade will be bothered by the heat of the sun
3. Tree stump or Ant Hill — the bush is full of the sound of movement in the grass but the big bull buffalo just lies there silently
4. Pumpkin — the walk of a woman expecting twins
5. Withered leaves — I went to the bush, the living things didn't welcome me only the dead things

D. *Celestial Bodies*

1. Moon and Stars — the cattle are lying down with the bull standing over them
2. Stars — white food covering
3. The Firmament — a dye bowl (calabash) that can't have a lid
4. Dark Overcast — shade that hasn't the dye (i.e. no variation of color)

E. *Miscellany*

1. Medicine Man — they fear him even though his business is lying
2. Hunger — a switch on the path that beats children and adults alike
3. Home — no matter how many young my animal has they will sleep inside it.
4. Needle and thread — my horse doesn't do well unless it has a tail
5. Bucket — a small trader that trades in the nether world's market (i.e. down the well)
6. Water dipper
 - (a) a young girl at our house who is always bathing
 - (b) my goat went to the nether world and returned pregnant

7. Drum

(a) from afar I hear the voice of my friend

(b) something cries out in the bush but has no intestines

8. Bow and Arrow — the harlot pretties herself but the men run

9. Mat Door Covering — you always stand close to the doorway but don't enter. Is this your mother's home?

10. A Fulani picks up palm nuts — a red thing fell, a red one picked it up.

11. Indigo dye — a lot of substance but inedible

12. Kind of sugar cane — a young girl with a full head of hair

13. Three-stone cooking places — three by three, holding the town together

14. Broom — I have 1,000 cattle tied with a single rope

15. Weaving — here a thread, there a thread with a pregnant woman between them

16. Granaries — the girls in our home are very stout

17. Measuring cup — the judge of the market

18. Defecating — one goes on the run but returns proudly

IMPLICATIONS OF THE HARING PAPER

I have quoted extensively from the Haring paper for two reasons: (1) I am in substantial agreement with his conclusion, though I feel that he has overstated his case a bit (see below), and (2) his treatment of riddling in its cultural context raises certain to me very interesting theoretical points. These center largely around the matter of whether a fairly tightly restricted type of human activity such as riddling apparently is best viewed as an inhibitor or a facilitator of human freedom.

One point that I feel Haring supports well is that the riddling process in Africa is a good bit more structured at every point (i.e. gives less room for creativity) than the casual observer might assume. He also does well to focus on the part riddling plays in the education or initiation of children into the knowledge of adult society. In this sense riddling participates with other types of folklore in acquainting the young with important aspects of the

world view and value system of the society. Furthermore, this education takes place in a fun way and in a non-competitive atmosphere — or, perhaps better, in an atmosphere where potential competitiveness is strictly controlled.

But into the treatment of riddling by Haring and his sources come hints of an expression of creativity and innovation in the riddling process that Haring doesn't seem to focus on. For, though he quotes John Blacking on Venda riddling (*The Social Value of Venda Riddles*, „African Studies”, 20, 1961) as saying, „I never encountered anyone who thought about the meaning of an unknown riddle and tried to reason out the answer” (p. 5), he also quotes those who refer to riddles and, presumably at least on occasion, their answers as inventable. Messenger, for example, in the quote cited above, refers to a riddle's „originator”. Harries and another of Haring's major sources, Wimsatt (*The Verbal Icon*, University of Kentucky Press, 1954) also refer to invention of riddles.

Indeed, common sense alone would be enough to tell us that someone, somewhere must have invented the riddles which exist today even if they are now simply passed on from generation to generation as one category of initiation secrets. So riddles (with their answers) must have once been invented. But is the process of riddle creation still taking place? And is there room for creativity in the answer given to a riddle?

A HAUSA EXPERIMENT

To test Haring's conclusions and to attempt to answer these questions for myself, I engaged in an experiment in riddling with my present Hausa informant (Mr. Abba Kano). I started by simply asking a few questions:

(1) Are Hausa riddles learned or created on the spot?

He replied that most Hausa riddles are learned with their fixed answer. Often, though, riddlers make up new riddles.

(2) Is the answer always fixed?

He replied that for most riddles the answer is more or less fixed, though for many there are more than one answer. The riddler, however, may choose the answer that he will accept on a given occasion and reject all others. He may even have two or more

answers in mind and reject whichever one the responder comes up with in favor of one that the responder does not mention. Though, in my experience with Hausa riddling all that a refusal to accept the first reply does is to delay the giving of the acceptable answer, (if it is known) since no penalty seemed to be attached to giving the wrong answer. Indeed, if the wrong answer was judged by the group to be very clever, the one who gave it would be complimented for his cleverness.

If the riddle is created by the riddler, he determines the answer but may be open to learning other answers from his audience. These he will not accept on that occasion but might demand on a subsequent occasion, especially if he judges someone else's answer to be superior to his original answer.

My informant stated that the more traditional the riddle is, the more fixed its answer. There is considerably more leeway allowed for alternative answers to more contemporary riddles.

Then we riddled a bit. He, of course, frequently stumped me. But I also stumped him a couple of times. Once though, when I had presented him with a riddle that I considered pretty difficult he thought for awhile and then came up with the correct answer. Yet, to the best of his recollection he had never heard that riddle before. That is, hearing the riddle stimulated him to attempt to produce the correct answer while, apparently, something in the culturally inculcated world view and rules for riddling enabled him to guess the right answer.

His personal competence in this aspect of his culture (though he claims to have little) was, therefore, an important factor in his ability to arrive at the correct answer by means of guessing. It was probably, further, a function of his overall feeling of competence in his operation of his culture that he felt able to even attempt a guess. Perhaps if he were a young child and, therefore, less confident of his cultural competence he would not have ventured a guess but would, on failing to remember an answer he knew to be correct, simply have given up. I would like to suggest that, since a high percentage of the data to which Haring refers relates to either children or foreign observers, there may be a factor of cultural insecurity operative here that explains why there seemed to be so little creativity apparent in those situations.

A HYPOTHESIS

Indeed, I would like to hypothesize that in riddling, as in most other areas of culture, creativity is not so much missing as it is regulated. That is, there are in riddling situations as in other situations those who innovate. These will ordinarily be persons who feel more rather than less secure in the riddling situation and who are looked to by at least some others in the society for innovation in at least this area of life. They may have achieved their position through a demonstration of their ability to innovate (if the culture allows this) or they may have been designated to such a position by their culture.

I would expect that in depth study of creativity in riddling in any given society would uncover the fact that there are various levels of innovators. There will be those who at the lowest level will test their innovations on only the least enculturated or least able riddlers in the society. And there will be successive levels of innovators up to those who are so confident of their ability and their acceptance as riddle innovators that they will not hesitate to innovate riddles and/or answers to riddles in any company.

Thus, though much of what Haring and his sources indicate concerning the fixity of the riddling process confirms rather than disconfirms what I have learned about riddling among Hausa *children*, it is not true to my experience with adults. For children are after all basically *recipients* of the present culture rather than the creators of the culture of the future. Riddles, therefore, come to them out of the past with all of the fixity of tradition that for all they know is centuries old. Thus also comes such cultural data to the foreign anthropologist or folklorist who, in spite of his sophistication in his own culture, comes to another culture's folklore as a child comes — to a fixed body of already established data which he must first master before he even dreams of adding to or otherwise altering it.

My suggestion is, therefore, that just as the erroneous view that riddling in African societies is a competitive and entirely creative game was due to the imperfect understanding of the situation by outside analysts, so is a view that sees riddling as well-nigh completely devoid of creativity. If the first pitfall was

fallen into by those outsiders who did not analyze the situation closely enough, the latter may perhaps be the error of those who, though they still could not see the situation whole, analyzed it too closely — or at least too rigidly. The corrective lies rather in seeing in this, as in every other aspect of culture, both the sometimes very strict guidelines which channel the human activity and also the areas for expression and creativity within these guidelines that culture allows and even compels at least some of its members to make use of.

As I see it, an adequate ethnography of riddling will have to specify both the restrictions under which the game is played and the allowances made for individual expression, variation and innovation. And we must assume from the fact that every aspect of culture is continually changing that there is some scope for variation in each. Where, however, the indoctrinational function of a cultural element such as riddling is most in focus, we can assume that the expressive and creative opportunities which that cultural element provides will be minimized. Societies simply don't want those whom they are indoctrinating (e.g. their children) to learn the system wrong. But play the same game with culturally secure adults and the opportunities for creativity come more into focus. To use Haring's analogy of the parallelism between riddling and the catechetical situation: while it is true that a young person is not encouraged (or even allowed) to alter the theology, there are those whose business it is to do just that — to innovate, to alter, to improve the existing to better meet the needs of the present and of the future.

It is by these designated innovators that such thoroughly up-dated examples of the Hausa folklore catechism have come about as

the Proverb: „Perhaps” is what keeps the European from telling a lie.

the Epithet: As impossible as the Kano railway station.

the Riddle: There I am perfectly healthy. But I don't talk or move.

Ans: my photograph.

Thus on the several occasions when I have observed adult Hausa speakers riddling there were a good many attempts to guess the answer and a good many compliments for those who guessed wrong but well. When, however, I became a participant in the process in an attempt to learn how to riddle, the attitude of my teachers changed completely. The flexibility was all gone and the catechetical character of the riddling much more in focus.