

APHORISTIC AND ENIGMATIC STRUCTURES IN ROMANIAN FOLKLORE

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Abstract: In this paper, we shall deal with riddles, proverbs, sayings: their contextual nature, structural types and functions. There are arguments in favour of an ancient ritual origin of these species, which today is being updated in non-ritual contexts.

Riddles preserve the function of a test of initiation in ritual folklore (wedding repertory) and non-ritual folklore (fairy-tales), which proves that they belong to a cultural code of the group. Proverbs are memorable accumulations of folk wisdom and experience that may be compared with the maxims of other peoples' culture. Unlike proverbs, which express a complete judgement with all terms being specified, sayings synthesize the life experience of the group in an elliptical form and can only be understood if one is acquainted with the cultural code to which they belong.

By plastically synthesizing folk thinking, riddles, proverbs and sayings manifest their aesthetic function. If, in other folkloric categories, metaphor is less employed, in aphoristic and enigmatic structures it occupies the first position in the stylistic inventory of folk creations.

These aphoristic and enigmatic structures prove the power of observation and wit of the Romanian people.

Keywords: folk culture, identity, riddles, proverbs, sayings

Introduction

Aphoristic and enigmatic structures include proverbs, sayings and riddles. There are arguments in favour of an ancient ritual origin of these species which, today, are being updated in non-ritual contexts. For instance, the presence of *Cântecul lăcății*, a number of initiatory riddles symbolically intended for the groom but solved by the godfather, in the nuptial repertory of Bihor pleads for the ritual origin of the riddle. It is assumed that riddles stem from *primitive patterns of thinking which underlay taboo language. Uttering a word would create, in the primitive view, a quasi-physical presence of the object or being it designated, which might have had a harmful effect on man; the harmful word was replaced in language by taboo substitutes, which most often created a metaphor or a metonymical paraphrase*¹. Riddles have preserved their initiatory function in ritual folklore (the wedding repertory) or non-ritual folklore (fairy-tales), which proves that they belong to a cultural code

¹ Pop, Mihai; Ruxăndoiu, Pavel. *Folclor literar românesc*. Bucureşti: Editura Didactică și Pedagogică, 1976, p. 255.

of the group. Riddle performance at the villagers' evening sittings, especially by young people, was a proof of wit and established the involvement in a type of closed knowledge, accessible only to members of the community.

Proverbs have their own history, decoded in the history of nations from which they emanated, ever since their emergence and constitution within established, organised communities, when they felt the need to introduce and comply with certain rules of conduct, capable of guaranteeing their viability. These rules of cohabitation, concisely expressed and inscribed on the pediment of the imaginary temple of any man-shaping philosophy, can be easily compared to what we call proverbs².

Proverbs are memorable accumulations of folk wisdom and experience that may be compared with the maxims of other peoples' culture. Unlike proverbs, which express a complete judgement with all terms being specified (e.g. *Cine se scoală de dimineaţă, departe ajunge* 'An early start makes easy stages'), sayings synthesise the life experience of the group in an elliptical form and can only be understood if one is acquainted with the cultural code to which they belong (e.g. *a face zile fripte* 'give someone a hard time').

As regards proverbs, it has been noted that *the fruits of human experience have not been preserved as flat formulas which are devoid of expressivity, but as highly suggestive expressions, but there are also non-metaphorical texts, therefore the whole corpus of proverbs does not make a literature*³. Though created and developed in orality, aphoristic literature has, ever since the Antiquity, been affected by contaminations with written maxims and apothegms attributed to well-known creators, hence *the difficulty to delimit what is pure oral tradition from what has penetrated into one area or another by means of the written word*⁴. The great corpus of proverbs compiled by Iuliu Zanne⁵, one of the largest world collections of aphoristic literature, suffers precisely from the heterogeneity of sources (both oral and scriptural), while the folkloric authenticity of texts possibly originating from orality has not been verified yet⁶.

Contexts of aphoristic and enigmatic structures

Metaphorical proverbs involve a certain amount of knowledge so that their meaning could be understood. For example, a person from a culture that does not have information on the feeding behaviour of the crow or the hawk (the former dares not attack a big prey and often contents itself with leftovers or vegetal food while the latter is a redoubtable predator) cannot understand why it is better to be *o zi șoim* ('a hawk for a day') than *un an cioară* ('a crow for a year'). As Pavel Ruxăndoiu states, *not only do proverbs [and riddles, for that matter, A/N] function (...) in acts of actual communication within their propositional content, but they are also invested with an additional semantic value, which cannot be reduced to the literal meaning of their lexical components. This additional semantic value is the result of a collective consensus authorised by tradition. By their nature itself, proverbs are used in the context of direct individual or group experiences*⁷. Sometimes, antagonistic variants of the

²Mircea, Duduleanu. *Introducere la Munca reflectată în proverbele lumii*. Bucureşti: Editura Albatros, 1972, p. VIII-IX.

³ Idem, pp. 242-243.

⁴ Ibidem, p. 244.

⁵ Iuliu, Zanne. *Proverbele românilor din România, Basarabia, Bucovina, Ungaria, Istria și Macedonia. Proverbe, zicători, povățuiri, cuvinte adevărate, asemănări, idiotisme și cimilituri. Cu un glosar româno-francez de..., vol. II*, Bucureşti: Imprimeria Statului, Editura Socecu & Comp., 1885-1903, p. 423.

⁶ Ruxăndoiu, Pavel. *Proverb și context*, Bucureşti: Editura Universităţii din Bucureşti, 2003, p. 12.

⁷ Idem, p. 42.

same proverbs may be encountered (*Decât un car de minte mai bine un dram de noroc*. ‘An ounce of luck is better than a pound of wisdom’/ *Mai bine un dram de minte decât un car de noroc* ‘An ounce of wisdom is better than a pound of luck’.), which proves that texts included in the aphoristic literature do not communicate universal precepts of life, but synthesise singular experiences that are specific, up to a certain point, to the collective existence. *Adjusting to the context also entails, sometimes, the transition of the proverb from a pattern of expression to another* (“*Alergi mult, mănânci puțin*.” ‘Run more, eat less’/ “*Cine aleargă mult, mănâncă puțin*” ‘He who runs more eats less’)⁸.

The contextual nature of riddles is most conclusively illustrated by how difficult it is for the uninitiated in the group culture to solve them. Almost all metaphors that encipher the meaning of riddles include elements belonging to the traditional rural universe.

The structures of proverbs, riddles and sayings

The proverb is a succinct folk expression, having the size of a sentence or a complex sentence, which renders in a concise form a general truth confirmed by a collective experience and imposed by tradition. Proverbs represent the folkloric aspect of the aphoristic genre and are often defined as maxims or apothegms that became popular, or as common maxims spreading all over the world. A folkloric species, proverbs are closely related to sayings, but the two should not be confused. Unlike sayings, which have a characterising function and usually form the logical predicate of a judgment, proverbs correspond to complete judgments, expressed through independent sentences or complex sentences, and always contain a piece of advice, some teaching or ethical-philosophical appraisal. Proverbs are never used isolated but within particular verbalised or non-verbalised contexts the significance of which they emphasise, relating them to some general idea and in regard to which they function as genuine metaphors⁹. By frequently using allegory, metaphor, comparison in their inner structure, proverbs often come to life in versified forms or unrhymed sentences but with a highly pronounced syntactic rhythm. Proverbs are of ancient origin and apparently were the first forms of law of mankind. In developed folkloric cultures, they generally make up a real code of moral and social conduct. Through their rich content, including the most various aspects of human existence, proverbs, starting with Solomon’s famous books, the personal collections of ancient Greek and Roman philosophers and going as far as the large mediaeval collections, were meant for practical purposes. The 19th century marks the transition to the research of proverbs as a genre of folk literature. Collections and dictionaries bring forward issues of systematisation of the vast material gathered, while theoretical researches aim to decode, in their content, essential aspects of the character of a people, connections with the history of the people. In Romanian written culture, proverbs appear first in folk books and the works of the great chroniclers. The first actual collection of proverbs belongs to Iordache Golescu (*Pilde, povățuiri și cuvinte adevărate și povești*), but the largest collection of this kind is that compiled by Iuliu Zanne. An original manner of treating proverbs is that of Anton Pann in *Povestea vorbei*¹⁰.

The riddle is a species of folk literature, very concise in form, which presents, by means of allegories or personifications, an object or a phenomenon that require identification through logical associations. It is believed that riddles originate in ancient times, stemming

⁸ Pop, Mihai; Ruxăndoiu, Pavel. *Folclor literar românesc*. București: Editura Didactică și Pedagogică, 1976, p. 245.

⁹ Nicolae, Constantinescu, Ioana-Ruxandra Frunteletă. *Folclor*. București: 2005, Proiectul pentru învățământul rural.

¹⁰ *Dicționar de terminologie literară*, București: Editura Științifică, 1970, pp. 263-264.

from the secret language of primitive tribes, aiming to test the skill and initiation of the youth into the concerns and secrets of grown-ups. Functioning as such, riddles were mentioned in folk-tales. Later, riddle became an entertaining game. In ancient times, riddles were noted by Aristotle. Professor Tudor Vianu defined the riddle as an open allegory, unlike the parable, which is a closed, finite allegory¹¹.

The saying is a folk, succinct and plastic expression, intended to suggestively characterise certain concrete situations or to reinforce an observation, an idea, a statement. Some sayings, through their characterising or reinforcing function itself, may suggest some advice, some counsel (e.g. *Ai carte, ai parte* 'Knowledge is power'); others act merely as formulas that individualise in a suggestive manner (*A intrat nora în blide* approx. 'A bull in a china shop'). The saying is a shorter formula as compared to the proverb; it is restricted to a phrase, rarely a sentence and cannot exist separately, therefore it is syntactically connected to the sentence or phrase which expresses the particular fact it defined¹².

From a structural point of view, research has distinguished two general types of proverbs: negative imperative (*La pomul lăudat să nu te duci cu sacul* 'Don't count your chickens before they hatch') and declarative (affirmative: *Buturuga mică răstoarnă carul mare* 'Little strokes fell great oaks' and negative: *Ulmul nu face pere* 'The elm does not grow pears'). Consequently, *we shall distinguish (...) in the paremiological language three categories of expressions: sayings, imperative proverbs and proverbs proper* [i.e. declarative – A/N]¹³.

Structurally, riddles are versified creations, sometimes marked, in terms of category, by the presence of initial formulas (*Ghici ghicitoarea mea!* 'Guess my riddle'; *Cinel, cinel!* 'Guess'; *Ce e aceea?* 'What is it?') and final formulas (*Sai, omule/ băiete de ghicește* 'Come and guess'; *Ziceți toți că nu-i așa!* 'You all say it isn't so!'; *Cine n-a ghici/ Gâtul i-oi suci* 'I shall twist the neck of he who does not guess'). However, some appear as mere questions and it is the context that suggests they belong to the enigmatic literature: *Cine trece valea și nu se udă?* (gândul) 'Who crosses the valley and does not get wet? (the thought)'. The structure of the riddle may be interrogative (*Ce-i mai mic ca Dumnezeu/ Și mai mare ca-mpăratul? – Moartea* 'What is smaller than God but greater than the emperor? - Death') or onomatopoeic (*Fâș, fâș/ Prin păiș/ Paci-paci/ Prin copaci – Coasa* 'Fizzle fizzle through straws – The scythe'), but a detailed analysis of the examples also highlights other patterns of construction of the species. Another important role in the structure of the riddle is played by the introductory formula which requires the solving of the enigma: *Ghici ghicitoarea mea, Cinel cinel!, Ciemel ciemel!*. Ovidiu Papadima distinguishes between riddle formulas in the south of the country (based on the verb *a ghici* 'to guess') and those of Transylvania (*Cinel, cinel!* and other similar ones), claiming that the meaning of *a ghici* covers the solving of an enigma, while *a cimili* 'talk in riddles' (from which *cinel* is derived) means to create an enigma, prompting the others to solve it¹⁴. Thus, *a cimili* and *a ghici* would denote two complementary actions, being equivalent to the verb pair *a încifra/ a descifra* 'encode/decode'.

Noting the frequency of the verbs *a fi* 'to be' and *a avea* 'to have' at the beginning of riddles, O. Papadima also distinguished between *pseudo-observation* riddles (starting from the verb *a fi*: *Sunt doi frați gemeni,/ Vor să se vadă/ Dar un munte îi desparte* (ochii) 'There are

¹¹ *Dicționar de terminologie literară*, București: Editura Științifică, 1970, p. 156.

¹² *Idem*, pp. 342-343.

¹³ Pop, Mihai; Ruxăndoiu, Pavel. *Folclor literar românesc*. București: Editura Didactică și Pedagogică, 1976, p. 247.

¹⁴ Ovidiu, Papadima. *Literatura populară română. Din istoria și poetica ei*. București: Editura pentru Literatură, 1968, p. 305.

two twin brothers, they want to see each other, but a mountain separates them – the eyes’) and *pseudo-confession* riddles (which begin with *a avea*: *Am o puică*; *Amuş îi albă*,/ *Amuş îi neagră* (ziua şi noaptea) ‘I have a chick: now she’s white, now she’s black (night and day)’)¹⁵.

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¹⁵ idem, p. 307.