

Folk Proverbs And Their Evolution In The Era Of Slavery

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Abstract: This article talks about the influence of the era of slavery on the periodic evolution of folk proverbs. The period of creation of folk proverbs can be recognized by the images in them. Usually in the periodic evolution of proverbs, the evolution of content is ahead of form. The content of proverbs quickly adapts to the new era. The form of the proverb remains normal, but the images become symbolic. Determining which period a proverb belongs to based on its images is discussed in this article using the example of the period of slavery.

Keywords: Proverb, slavery, formation, slave, slave trader, variant, version, evolution, artistic thinking, classicism.

Introduction: The most painful period in human history is considered to be the era of slavery. On the one hand, it was during this period that humanity formed class-based societies, states, and nations. One could say that true history begins from this time. As B. Saatov notes: "In the history of humanity, the very emergence of society is a remarkable phenomenon. After all, the main factor that allowed humanity to leave its life in the form of history was its existence in the form of a society. Paremiology (the science of proverbs and sayings) is also created, exists, and disappears only within society" [4.26].

Indeed, the influence of socio-economic formations and class relations can be traced in many proverbs. However, this does not give us grounds to consider proverbs solely as a product of class. First and foremost, proverbs are folk instructions born out of a desire to understand the world and human nature, from observing society and nature, from life experience and everyday lessons. Class is only one of their branches. Therefore, the statement that "...the classification of Uzbek folk proverbs by the time of their creation can only begin with the era of slavery" [4.26] cannot be considered justified. Proverbs, as a product of popular thought, began to emerge long before the slave-owning system.

Nevertheless, the development and evolution of society led to the growth of popular consciousness and the expansion of worldview. Consequently, each socio-

economic formation has its own perspective on the world and its own artistic thinking.

Archaeological excavations conducted in Central Asia show that in the territories of modern Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan, the slave-owning system began to form in the 6th–4th centuries BCE and existed until the 3rd–4th centuries CE. However, slavery in Central Asia differed sharply from that of Ancient Rome. In this region, slavery existed only as a way of economic life [7.62].

The idea of periodizing proverbs based on socio-historical formations from the perspective of historical and folkloric study was first proposed by the Uzbek folklorist Khodi Zarifov [6.348]. Later, researchers of proverbs T. Mirzaev and B. Sarimsokov also emphasized that socio-economic formations play a special role in the evolution of proverbs, noting:

"...various socio-economic formations experienced by a given people are reflected in folk proverbs. From this perspective, Uzbek folk proverbs are divided into three groups:

- a) proverbs created in the era of slavery;
- b) proverbs created in the era of feudalism;
- c) proverbs created under the socialist system" [1.96].

B. Saatov followed the same approach in classifying the historical-folkloric process of proverbs [4.26]. In our study, we also focus on the influence of socio-economic formations on folk artistic thinking and on the evolution

of this thinking in a historical perspective.

The slave-owning system introduced class divisions and social stratification into human society. As a result, the concepts of “slave” and “slave-owner” appeared in folk artistic thinking, reflecting the influence of this period. A once socially unified individual became divided into two classes. Against the backdrop of primitive life, the opposition of mythological images embodying good and evil gradually simplified, taking the form of opposing poles in the images of “slave” and “slave-owner.”

Accordingly, members of each of these classes had their own life views and social worldviews, leading to the creation of oral folk works of two types:

1. Folklore characteristic of the upper class;
2. Folklore characteristic of the lower class.

Class contradictions influenced not only people's lifestyles but also their consciousness and thinking. Subordinate classes believed in the predestination of the slave's fate, while the ruling class believed in their right to govern and rule. Each created its own life rules corresponding to their social position. All of this is reflected in both oral folk art and written literature. Folk tales, legends, narratives, and sayings characteristic of the artistic thinking of that era appeared during this period.

The concept of the slave and slavery in human history is very ancient, tracing its roots back to the stories associated with the prophet Noah (Nuh). The Bible recounts that once Noah awoke and learned that one of his sons, Ham, had seen him naked. Noah was enraged at his disrespectful son and cursed the descendants of Canaan, Ham's son, saying: “Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren” (Genesis 9:25) [8].

Scholars studying the origins of slavery note that both the Bible (Torah) and the Gospel endorse slavery, whereas the Quran and Hadiths do not; on the contrary, they contain instructions for freeing slaves. Islamic scholar Abu Muslim writes: “The Bible is the main text used to justify slavery. According to it, God tells the Jews: ‘To have slaves and maidservants, buy them from the peoples around you... You may pass them on to your sons as property; rule over them as slaves forever.’ The patriarch and ‘father of the righteous,’ chosen by God out of His love, Abraham (Ibrahim), armed 318 slaves born in his household (Genesis 14:14), included them in the list of his property (Genesis 12:16, 24:35–36), and passed them on to his son Isaac (Genesis 26:13–14). The Bible says God blessed Abraham and multiplied his slaves” (Genesis 24:35) [8].

Indeed, slavery arose long before the advent of Islam, and ancient sacred texts also influenced the formation of proverbs related to slavery. In many folk proverbs reflecting the slave-owning system, one can observe ideas of submission to the slave's fate and obedience to the master, influenced by these texts.

“In some of the seventy stories in sacred texts, slavery is directly supported. Slaves are instructed to accept their lot, and masters are to show mercy to their slaves. The First Epistle to Timothy teaches slaves humility and obedience to their masters, as instructed by Jesus Christ. Until the end of the last century, many Christian scholars and theologians were convinced that the Bible justified slavery” [8].

Slave-owners regarded such views as law and sought to embed these ideas in folk proverbs. For example, the proverb “Qulning quyisi bo'lmaz” (“A slave has no inferior/lower-ranking slave”) expresses the idea that a slave has no place in society and all slaves should be treated equally. Although this proverb reflects the views of the slave-owning era, it is still used today, in a figurative sense, as an ironic remark toward people considered unworthy by higher social circles. In the consciousness of slave-owners, such expressions reinforced the idea that a slave is a thing and should not be treated with compassion or mercy.

A slave, however, is also a human being, with consciousness and intellect, and this was what slave-owners feared most. If a slave becomes intelligent, disobedience arises, causing great harm to the master. Therefore, slaves were kept under severe pressure, even subjugating their thoughts and imagination. The proverb “The slave's wit comes after lunch” (2.291) emerged from this belief. A slave-owner, acknowledging that a slave also possesses reason, simultaneously feared him and sought to humiliate him. Today, this proverb is used ironically, often by managers toward subordinates when tasks are not completed on time, and employees begin to justify themselves. Thus, the ancient derogatory meaning of the proverb still persists.

Although the image of the slave-owner is not depicted in proverbs, his character is easily recognized through sayings about slaves. He is cruel, merciless, and extremely arrogant. The proverb “You can tell a slave is walking by the back of his head” was also created by a slave-owner. It shows that the master constantly monitors the slave, observing every move to prevent him from raising his head. The slave is never content with his life, as seen in his expression and gaze. If the slave's hatred grows, it may lead to revolt. Hence, the master lives in constant vigilance and anxiety. The derogatory meaning dominates in this proverb, though

today it is used figuratively.

For instance, the proverb “A slave is an enemy, a dog is a wolf” reflects the slave-owner’s fear of rebellion. This proverb appeared in the era of slavery, included in the work *Divan Lughat al-Turk*, and explained by the scholar Mahmud al-Kashgari. In the dictionary, it is recorded as “Qul jag’i, it böpi.” Its meaning: “A slave is an enemy; if an opportunity arises, he will steal the master’s property and try to escape. The dog for the yard is like a wolf; if it finds food, it cannot resist.” The proverb conveys that a slave is little loyal to his master.

If we reflect on the content, the proverb reveals a truth: a slave is a once-free person, captured in war or raids, deprived of rights and forced into hard labor. Therefore, a slave cannot be a friend to his oppressor who took his freedom and seeks a chance to regain it. History provides many examples. The Samanid emirs commissioned the Bukhara poet Dakiki to write the *Shahnameh* about Persian rulers, providing him with a workshop, funds, and slaves to assist. After writing a thousand couplets (*gushtab*), he was killed by his own slave [5.254].

The second part of the proverb compares a dog with a wolf, meaning that although the dog seems loyal, it originates from a wolf and, succumbing to instinct, may become ferocious and betray the master. Over time, the proverb evolved semantically and produced similar variants, such as “If wolves befriend dogs, humans will have no luck,” or “You can’t make meat from intestines; you can’t make a friend from someone else’s slave.”

Indeed, “the breadth of semantic coverage in proverbs allows for remarkable semantic changes over time, enabling individual proverbs to be used in various thematic contexts” [3.19].

The Uzbek proverb “When a slave goes mad, he spits into the well” directly relates to rebellion, which constantly alarmed slave-owners. B. Saatov writes: “Slaves, subjected to severe oppression and pushed to their limits, sometimes rose in revolt, or sometimes expressed protest by spitting into the communal well. A well into which a slave spat was considered defiled, and slave-owners were forced to dig a new well or relocate. This act was called ‘a mad slave.’”

Water has long been considered sacred by all peoples, and its defilement or waste was viewed as a grave sin. However, the expression “a slave spits into the well” in the proverb has no historical basis—it is a product of artistic thinking and is used figuratively. The proverb conveys the ingratitude of the slave, his disloyalty to the master, and rejection of his fate. From ancient times, defiling water was considered a serious crime, firmly established in the collective consciousness. Therefore, there are many similar proverbs:

- “Do not spit into the well from which you drink water,”
- “Spitting into water is a sin; spitting into a well is sacrilege.”

They also emphasize that a slave showing ingratitude becomes a sinner and a transgressor.

At the same time, slaves themselves, reflecting on their lives and relying on personal experience, created proverbs through which their worldview and inner life can be understood. For example, the proverb “A slave does not die; his fate does not diminish” reflects the slave’s perception of his destiny: everything comes from God, and sustenance depends not on man but on the Almighty. Hence, it expresses humility and submission to fate. Another proverb, “For a slave, escape is an impossible dream,” shows the desire for freedom inherent in a person deprived of will.

Thus, with the emergence of the slave-owning system alongside statehood, social stratification also appeared. Both social groups had their own views of humanity and the world, and based on these perspectives, folklore and written literature of the slave-owning period were formed. From preserved oral and written sources, one can study the spiritual world, social views, and artistic thinking of people of that era.

Proverbs created in the era of slavery are still used today. However, over time, their original meaning has changed, and under the influence of language and thought evolution, they acquired figurative meanings. In modern proverbs, the image of a slave symbolizes a powerless, dependent, and sub.

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