

PROVERBS AND IDIOMATIC PHRASES IN ZAGHAWA LANGUAGE

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1. INTRODUCTION

Since independence, language has been one of the major issues of Sudanese politics and Sudanese self-representation. Although Sudan is known for its high degree of linguistic diversity, the practical state policy has been mostly characterized by its rigid pan-Arabist ideology. Very little is known about language situation in Sudan in general and western Sudan in particular. With prospects of peace, a new era of language policies might emerge. (cf. The Navaisha Peace Protocol and Declaration of Principles for the Resolution of the Sudanese Conflict in Darfur). The latter declaration points out that “the diversity of the people of the Sudan is of paramount importance, as are the full recognition and accommodation of the multi-ethnic, multi- religious, as well as the development of multi-cultural character of the society.”¹ Recognition of multi-culturalism has also been reiterated in the transitional constitution of the Sudan. Article (47) maintains that ethnic and cultural groups shall have the right to promote their culture and use their languages. Such constitutional generalities, in different parts of Sudan, will be in need of concrete linguistic and socio-linguistic data in order to avoid the pitfalls of language ideologies.

1.1 Languages in Darfur:

Darfur is a multilingual community. According to Thelwall’s linguistic survey (1970), at least sixteen languages are spoken by the settled inhabitants in addition to Arabic as a *lingua-franca* as in the following list:

Beigo	Borno	Kinin	Sinyar
Berti	Daju	Mararit	Sungor
Birgid	Fur	Masalit	Tama (including Erenga)
Borko	Guraan	Midob	Zaghawa.

¹ .DECLARATION OF PRINCIPLES FOR THE RESOLUTION OF THE SUDANESE CONFLICT IN DARFUR
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A large scale process of language shift is taking place in favour of Arabic among languages of Darfur. For example, Berti, Birgid, Mima, Tama and Tunjur are lost languages through gradual shift to Arabic in all functions. The other languages in the list are also imminently endangered if no solid socio-linguistic measures are taken towards language planning, codification and standardization. For valorization of the cultural and linguistic diversity to see light, training and linguistically impartial political decisions are required.

1.2 Zaghawa Language(Beri-a):

Zaghawa is one of the biggest tribes in Darfur(approximately about 180,000).They call themselves (Beri) and their language (Beri-a).The name Zaghawa itself is the term other ethnic groups use to identify them. Zaghawa language which belongs to the Saharan family was originally spoken in Dar Zaghawa(land of Zaghawa) , in the northern most zone of Darfur extending socio-linguistically to the eastern border of Chad. Due to adverse ecological conditions, as well as the recent political turmoil, a wide scale diaspora has taken place since 1960s. Waves of migrations led to the reshuffle of Zaghawa within the territories of other ethnic and linguistic communities, Osman (2004:2).

Beri divide their language into four main branches according to clan classification:

1. Wegi, numerically the largest of the four branches remains mostly within Sudan, where they used to have eight sultanates. With Kube, they share the name Zaghawa, but they have their distinctive Arab names also, the most commonest among them Twer, less common ones include Gala and Artag. Wegi essentially maintains uniformity in its native lexicon, although further east people have borrowed profusely from Arabic. Two sub- clans, the Unai and the Eni, are recognized to have some minor variations.

2. Kube stretches out the border between Sudan and Chad but most Kube-ra (Kube people) live in Chad. The present political boundary reflects the division of two Kube sultanates, one based at Hiri-ba in Chad and the other based at Tine on the borderline between Sudan and Chad.
3. Tuba used to live in the area north of that of Kube but draught cycles compelled them to drift away, mixing at times with Kube, at times in separate communities, and at times even entirely south of the Kube in land traditionally attributed to the neighbouring Tama people. Their nomadic nature led the Arabs to give them a separate name, the Bedyat. Tuba also comprises two main dialects: the majority Biria and the smaller Brogat. The latter has intermarried with the adjacent Gorane people (linguistically known as Daza). Most also speak the Gorane language (Daza-ga), with the younger generation increasingly proficient in their mother tongue. Brogat contrasts minimally with Biria, mostly in consonant voicing, where Borogat seem to retain some earlier contrasts.
4. Dirong is another unique dialect, sharing common aspects with Guruf, towards the south west of and centered around the town of Martibe. In the larger Kube community, this dialect has disadvantaged status. Wolfe (1999:11).

In the entire Zaghawa homeland, the blacksmith caste is thought by some to speak differently from the main stream of population. Most of these differences, however, are non linguistic in nature, such as speed of speech, eloquence, tendency to over use metaphor, throatiness, proverbs and idiomatic expressions.

1.3 Objectives:

The major objectives of this paper can be summed up in the following points:

1. Collection, analysis, and presentation of 70 proverbs and 23 idiomatic phrases in Zaghawa language, as a rich source of cultural heritage in its all-encompassing, general, specific and symbolic anthropological sense. According to White (1959:3), “culture consists of tools, implements, utensils, clothing, ornaments, customs, institutions, beliefs, rituals, games, works of art, language, etc.” All these aspects are manifest in the language.

2. Translation and explanation of varied levels of culture embodied in the deep meaning of proverbs and idiomatic expressions: national, international and sub-culture.
3. Documentation of proverbs and idiomatic phrases of Zaghawa language as a rich repository of wisdom.
4. Encouragement of research in the field of vernacular languages of Darfur, because language is one of the richest sources of human heritage and culture.

1.4 **Previous Studies:**

To the best of my knowledge, little research has been conducted in this specific field. Suleiman (2005:131) in a chapter collected forty five proverbs and sayings of Zaghawa (Kube dialect), with their equivalent general meanings in Arabic. Concerning Zaghawa language in general, a few researchers have written on some aspects, for example, Mac Michael(1912), Cyffer(1991),Fadoul(1996),Jakobi(1999),Wolfe(1999),Osman(2004),Ali (2005).

1.5 **Methodology:**

The data for the present paper was collected through interviews with 50 fluent native speakers of Zaghawa language, ranging from 35-90 in their age. Direct questions were used. Besides; participant and non-participant observation strategies have been adopted in different speech contexts; for example, friendly conversations, sessions for resolution of conflicts and other social gatherings. Data collection extended for a period of two years, in some villages and towns of Darfur.

Each proverb is first written in Zaghawa language then literally translated into English with explanation of its deep meaning and the equivalent English proverb if there is one. As *Beri-a* has no standard code so far, I used the Latin script I already used to represent its phonemes, Osman (2004).

2. **PROVERBS AND IDIOSMS**

A proverb is a short statement of advice that has passed into general use, communicating common experience. It is often expressed in metaphor,

alliteration or rhyme, for example, the English: “when the cat is away the mice will play”. This is why translation across languages deprives proverbs much of their original poetic flavour. In his lucid collection of English proverbs, most of which were borrowed from different languages, Baalbaki(2000) rightly called them “lamps of experience”, because they stand as light-houses that lead people navigating in the ocean of their daily life. These succinct memorable statements are repositories of accumulated classical wisdom, warning, prediction or analytical observation that enable thoughts to be communicated and exchanged without the effort of formulation, Ferguson(1983: IV). African proverbs are a key to understanding subtleties of African ways of life in the past and the present. They may express eternal truths, aid in avoiding foolish acts or guide to a good conduct. The rhetorical force of *Beri-a* proverbs often brings special meaning to certain situations, helps in resolution of many social and even political disputes and teaches valuable lessons in a few words. Some *Beri-a* proverbs are simple sayings which convey only their literal meanings. Some are broader and have more general philosophical applications in different contexts and aspire to deal with mysteries and paradoxes of life. Besides, *Beri-a* speakers very often savour their speech with idiomatic phrases. According to Mc Caige and Manser(1986: iii), idioms are fixed expressions consisting of more than one word with meaning that cannot be inferred by putting together the meaning of individual words in it. In *Beri-a*, some of these forms tend to be frozen and do not readily enter into other combinations. One may not be able to understand all proverbs and idioms of *Beri-a* without understanding the culture behind it. As the case with most African languages and literature, they are orally passed from one generation to another. Socio-linguistically, they are endangered and in urgent need for collection.

2.1 Zaghawa Proverbs:

1. BadI kada totu durgɔɪ. A good word is the perfume of the heart.

Meaning: Polite speech is a sign of courtesy.

2. Aa tiliri baga nonu tilire di. Having a mouth is better than having a *nonu*² of millet.
Meaning: A good tongue is a good weapon. English equivalent: “Speak and speed, ask and have”.
3. Deli ar emi kiti o bifo. A snake with a locust in the mouth never bites.
Meaning: A bribed person keeps silent.
4. Deli lebaŋ dawa lejfo. A snake that has bitten you would not give you treatment.
Meaning: Do not seek the assistance of your enemy when you are in trouble.
5. Aa terigile margI jilo. A mouth is not an axe to get blunt.
Meaning: Polite speech costs you nothing. It teaches avoidance of ill speech.
6. Jefi tɔtogo tofo. A knife cannot carve its handle.
Meaning: You need each other to accomplish things. English equivalent: “One hand washes the other”.
7. Bei bei re dergi lɔkor Jefe. A goat that departs the flock cries alone.
Meaning: One who deserts people and lives alone suffers, not the company. English equivalent: “The lone sheep is in danger of the wolf”.
8. Ta lɔko garu swe tebifo. One head cannot carry two pots.
Meaning: Two actions cannot be properly performed at a time.
9. O turjai gili bar talv. Stars are not shown to one who lies on his back.
Meaning: Clear things need no explanation.
10. Hifi jifile bo kau gi. Collect the cows to kill the bull.
Meaning: If you want to take a serious action against someone, it is better to do it indirectly.
11. Ta ta badagɔr terle. A head is sharpened with another head.
Meaning: As a knife is sharpened with another knife, also thought needs to be supported and strengthened with another thought. English equivalent: “Two heads are better than one”.
12. O delio biɔfi ofu biri kugufi. That has been bitten by a snake is afraid of a grey rope.

² .*nunu*: A traditional store of grain made of mud.

- Meaning: Bitter experience teaches caution. English equivalent: “He that has been bitten by a serpent is afraid of a rope”.
13. O tarɛ tere hewti saufe. That has been hit on the head learns avoidance.
Meaning: A bad practical experience makes one careful later on. English equivalent: “The burned child dreads the fire”.
14. Kemer tɛdI auŋI ha dufe. A rat that has tasted the salt licks stones.
Meaning: Pleasant experience encourages other attempts.
15. Di gilelito tagalori ɔŋI nai lo. If you want to milk a camel that you cannot, whip the baby-camel.
Meaning: Indirect pressure is often useful in achieving objectives.
16. Adi adI adI badagɔ kujʃo. A donkey cannot tie another donkey.
Meaning: A woman cannot perform some social obligations of another woman, for example, marriage ceremonies.
17. Ta gino kisai,dei gino kisai de de. Better to trouble your feet than to trouble your brain.
Meaning: Physical effort is easier than the mental effort.
18. Tarmai mela deinɔgo ʃife. Any hip follows its thigh.
Meaning: Every person has his/her own close relatives, even within the members of one extended family.
19. Bifi kokifur soboli gujʃai. If dogs fight the rabbit is lucky.
Meaning: If your enemies fight with one another, you are lucky.
20. Bja ru noguda ru darʃIfv. You cannot collect *nogu*³, sitting in a shade.
Meaning: You need to suffer in order to enjoy the fruit of your labour.
English equivalent: “No pain no gain”.
21. Egi soko idorei,ur egiro margI tibiromo manda rei. All illnesses are from God, bellyache and insult are from the person himself.
Meaning: If you have bellyache, it means you ate something wrong and if you were insulted, that is because you had insulted someone; you should always expect to be paid back in your own coin.
22. Deli salja kabIr kujle. Even if you gave birth to a snake, you should tie it on your waist.
Meaning: Even if your child is bad still it is your child.

³.*nogu*: Tiny sweet root vegetables that grow on muddy lands, in fields exposed to sun shine. Therefore *nogu* collectors have to sit in the sun while digging for them.

23. Ta dei bjar befe ʃe,dei ta bja tifu. The head enters the feet in the shade, but the feet never enter the head in the shade.
Meaning: Think before you act.
24. Idi ʃeli gu leʃefe. The earth you ate will eat you.
Meaning: When you die you will mix with earth, no matter how luxurious you lived.
25. Tarmai talai bje kedir lo le. A wound on the buttocks is seen inside the house.
Meaning: Family affairs should be discussed privately. English equivalent: “Linins should not be washed in public”.
26. Gu bifi ga keife. Food is given even to a dog.
Meaning: If food is given to a dog, a human being is worthy of it. It is a call for generosity.
27. Omu dei ogo kigɔfor o dei galle. A lame person hides his leg and ridicules another person’s leg.
Meaning: Do not mock the shortcomings of other people that you have yourself. English equivalent: “The pot calls the kettle black”.
28. ɛfi gu warI kete gu ketire. What the ɛef⁴ scatters kete⁵ will clean.
Meaning: What the children spoil, grown up will set right.
29. Bi je ɔrga keifo. Hot water does not quench thirst.
Meaning: Ill-gotten gains never prosper.
30. Tar usto fei afor deir tore. Plan with the brain and dance with the feet.
Meaning: Think before you act. English equivalent: “Look before you leap”.
31. Gaga ainonig,kisai kadairo.
Meaning: Success comes after suffering. English equivalent: “No pleasure without pain”.
32. BIru kIdaru nau kitjo. There is no badness in water and parents.
Meaning: Parents should be respected and honoured, however bad they are.
33. Di kei gine bifi wo ni. The camel is walking, the dog is barking.

⁴.ɛef: A deep round bowl with a wide open top, made of tree roots, used especially for holding grains.

⁵.kete: A flat tray with raised edges, made of tree roots, used for carrying things and cleaning grains.

- Meaning: It refers to a person who continues to do what s/he likes, indifferent of the critics around him/her.
34. Begidiro hidōro swe derire sauri. Enter between a tree and its bark.
Meaning: One should not interfere in other people's affairs. English equivalent: "Caught between a rock and a hard place."
35. O egeljo o egelo sale. A person you know begets a person you do not know.
Meaning: If members of the same extended family do not live together, it is likely that they do not know one another.
36. Nasa kejeleliri bu kofu re telor keje. If you want to tell the truth, put a stick beside you.
Meaning: Truth is bitter and people probably dislike it.
37. O bir sowfi kew je, jeer sowfi keibo. Stop he who enters into water, not he who enters into fire.
Meaning: A person who enters into water may drown suddenly thinking that he is safe, because cold water deceives him. But a person who enters into fire will come back himself, because of the heat.
38. Tafi difteti ledεbeiga odo olo ba tele. Even if you wear seven clothes, you will touch your navel.
Meaning: Very close relatives are the only people who stand by somebody in difficult situations.
39. Guloru gorboru okifu. An egg and a stone never quarrel.
Meaning: A subject should not quarrel with a king, because he will be the loser.
40. Urolo agI kebelo agIre di. The hunger of your belly is better than the hunger of your ear.
Meaning: Hunger for information is more dangerous than starvation.
41. ōgo lōko IdI εfi lo .One broom does not clean the earth.
Meaning: To function more effectively and properly unity is needed.
42. Hifi teteogo tegilile keifo. A cow does not feel the heaviness of its own horn.
Meaning: A mother does not get tired of carrying her own child.
43. Gεr tibe tulor aigir бага гεrla? You do not farm in autumn and want millet in summer?

- Meaning: You should not expect reaping rewards for something you have not worked for.
44. Dafa abu na ta Irɛ. Many midwives break the head of the child.
Meaning: The more people that want to help or participate, the worse results. English equivalent: “Too many cooks spoil the broth”.
45. Di kolelir mɔ̃ndi kɛtɛla? The camel is running and you bring luggage?
Meaning: Do not speak about reconstruction if the war is not over.
46. Di ru huf ru swe deri re kusuri. Get out betwixt and between a camel and a saddle.
Meaning: An injury, danger, or failure that is just avoided. English equivalent: “A narrow shave”.
47. Tegelo gili deijolor tile. You must wear the shoe you made.
Meaning: You must be responsible for the consequences of your own actions. English equivalent: “As you make your bed, so you must lie on it”.
48. O mɛla wego cɔna kiti. Every person has his few lice.
Meaning: Every person has his/her shortcomings as, a human being.
49. Koso bor tɛfi mɔ̃noj. A cousin is a thorn of tɛfi⁶- tree.
Meaning: No enemy is worse than a familiar enemy (of ones own relatives).
50. O bau soti kiti ɛhɛɛ ʒigɛfɛ. A man with two wives sleeps without supper.
Meaning: Dependence on two sources often causes negligence.
51. Soko gerlir, soko berle. If you want it all, you leave it all.
Meaning: He, who wants to possess everything, loses everything. English equivalent: “He who grasps at too much loses everything”.
52. Bɔ̃diru soboliru ke kɔ̃suri tulo. You do not know from where a rabbit and a problem come up.
Meaning: Problems occur unexpectedly.
53. Mɔ̃nolo hɔ̃simoloj. Your wealth is your enemy.
Meaning: Richness brings care and fears. English equivalent: “Much coin much care”.
54. Mifɛga ehero ʒe kɔ̃luga lio. Neither should the fox sleep without supper nor the baby- goat be killed.

⁶. tɛfi⁶-tree: A large tropical tree with long sharp thorns .

- Meaning: There is measure and compromise in all things.
55. ifi kalɔ tile lege, ifi kalge lir ifi betir letife. Do not end your anger immediately, sleep with it. If you try to put an end to it on the spot, it ends in cruelty.
Meaning: Delay is the antidote of anger; one should react immediately when s/he is angry.
56. Aigir tibe beifi , gijer beifu. Help in farming is sought in summer not in autumn.
Meaning: One good turn in advance deserves another. English equivalent: “Help for help in harvest. [The implication is that the person one helps now will return the favour in time of need].
57. Bau mow marI tiliri, sadaga ujlo. If you have an elderly sick parent, do not leave attending other people’s funerals.
Meaning: Do good deeds in anticipation for a good return.
58. Hirte lɔko ebir kallɔ. One horse does not raise dust.
Meaning: Individual effort does achieve success.
59. Di tar mɔn kagai. The luggage came to the neck of the camel.
Meaning: Things got complicated.
60. Dergelore dire dibe alu la lulu, la dergelore adire dibe alu lulu. Those who consulted one another and fell from a camel did not die; those who fell from a donkey without consultation died.
Meaning: No matter how complicated a problem, plotting and planning ahead of time leads to success. Even if it is a simple problem, lack of plotting results in failure.
61. BadI eilai ker gele. A problem is a layer in a circle, it rotates.
Meaning: A problem that encounters X today, may encounter Y tomorrow. Therefore, X should help Y to be helped in turn.
62. Beti tagalɔ ai bɛlɔ. Do not put *ai*⁷ on the trees that you cannot shake.
Meaning: Do not challenge those who are more powerful than you in a conflict, for fear of losing. English equivalent: “Kindle not a fire that you cannot extinguish”.
63. bI sa gi ofi kore kale. Cold water leaks from a water-skin.

⁷.ai: A long hooked stick used for shaking trees to provide fodder for sheep.

- Meaning: Gentleness is better than fury and force.
64. L̄tifo k̄lilɛ labuɛ,l̄tifi ejife labuɛ. He who dislikes you advises you laughingly; he who likes you advises you weepily.
Meaning: A person, who genuinely likes you, gives sincere advice.
65. Marg ter ɔ̄gv karro. A white tooth does not bleed.
Meaning: Smiling and being friendly causes you no harm.
66. Ara egelo bei daba dI di. A shoulder of a goat is better than a relative you do not know.
Meaning: You do not respect people you do not know, even if they are close relatives.
67. Ti wetti nowi:tuloro,tiloro,iloroj. Three things are bad: knowing not, having not and seeing not.
Meaning: Three things are bad: lack of information, absence and poverty.
68. Di tagɔ kobo ifo. A camel does not see the curvature of its neck.
Meaning: person cannot see his/her own shortcomings as other people.
69. AdI jogu kilje m̄n ogo tujafu. They killed their donkey and divided their luggage.
Meaning: They quarreled and divided.
70. O birli atI ogo ḡfo. He who dances does not hide his beard.
Meaning: A person who behaves frivolously is not concerned with dignity.

2.2. Zaghawa Idioms:

1. Bifi mij ko ter. A black dog with a white patch on the forehead.
Meaning: A rare thing.
2. Er kabI. Grandfathers' waist.
Meaning: Extended family.
3. Dei wɛfa. Three-legged.
Meaning: Of an animal bought illegally.
4. ur kejfo. Do not give stomachs.
Meaning: Doubtful.
5. Deire tebi. Take somebody from the legs.
Meaning: Ask indirect questions.

6. Deir bæ ʃifo. Never go in feet with somebody.
Meaning: At loggerheads with somebody.
7. Itra kejfo. Do not give faces.
Meaning: To meet people with a frowned face.
8. MargI tibi. Tooth pricking.
Meaning: Rebuking or reprimanding.
9. Dei kiʃi. Feet itching.
Meaning: Have desire to walk.
10. Ur mej .Black-bellied.
Meaning: Hard-hearted.
11. Ta konu. Strong-headed.
Meaning: Obstinate.
12. Ta offe. Light-headed.
Meaning: Credulous.
13. Ta tegi. Head-cut.
Meaning: In bewilderment or confusion.
14. Itra mej. Black-faced.
Meaning: Angry.
15. Guwa burdur kibej. Enter crows in the sky.
Meaning: Frighten others verbally.
16. Ba ʃi. Add hand.
Meaning: Help.
17. Keɓa ilo. Have no ears' pain.
Meaning: Somebody is very healthy.
18. Tortejogo eni dejele ji. His vultures are well-fed with meat.
Meaning: He is brave.
19. Ho betir ketelle egi. He perched a *ho*⁸ on my tree.
Meaning: He told me lies.
20. AdIjogo beli. His donkey is pregnant.
Meaning: Somebody is reluctant to do something.
21. Bifi ɛmejar keili elei. Like a dog that has gone to locust hunting.
Meaning: A person who does not return quickly when sent on an errand.
22. Kume ʃire di lefa. Are you well from the colds?

⁸.*ho*: A large bird that never perch on trees.

Meaning: Are you well? (An expression used in greeting).
23. Botugu lejkili. May you be rained?

Meaning: Please.

3. CONCLUSION

This collection is by no means an exhaustive study of Zaghawa proverbs and idiomatic phrases. More extensive research is needed to probe both fields. As they have been handed down by word of mouth from generation to generation, it is inevitable that slight variation in wording will exist among different dialects of the language. Apart from reflecting distinctive cultural mores of Zaghawa, these proverbs and idiomatic phrases express universal concepts. As regards the wisdom of the proverbs, they have to be short and memorable but not necessarily mere platitudes. They do not have to be true in all contexts! Folk wisdom is often at best paradoxical, at worst contradictory (examples: 15, 16, 23, 36, 37, 40, 50, and 53) if not viewed empathetically. Perhaps it is not right to consider proverbs and idiomatic phrases as a source of accumulated wisdom. Probably they are better seen as a collection of condensed tags that enable ideas to be communicated and exchanged without the effort of verbosity.

Hopefully, other researchers will conduct more and more studies on proverbs of languages of Darfur in general and Zaghawa language in particular. Such studies will bring to light a new kaleidoscope to the national and international cultural heritage. If pride in indigenous languages is the corner stone of linguistic preservation, speakers of these languages are also called upon not to accept none of their languages being identified as a *rutana*⁹, (with its passive overtones) and more importantly, to use them actively in communication.

⁹.*rutana*: A non-standard Arabic word, often used with passive overtones, referring to a vernacular language: the language spoken in a particular area or by a particular group, especially one that is not the official or written language.

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