

Popular Proverbs

An Entrance to Palestinian Culture

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Introduction

As a member of Palestinian society and someone who has had the privilege of sharing in its culture and values, I have been shaped and influenced by the everyday use of proverbs since early childhood. It is during these years that I first began to understand and appreciate that Palestinians, like most Arabs, routinely draw on a myriad of popular proverbs in their communication with each other. This book represents a compilation of my long-standing efforts to both record and teach with these proverbs. Passed down from generation to generation, these proverbs have endured the test of time and have come to reflect and influence our present cultural identity just as they have for generations before us. As is often the case with popular knowledge, proverbs may vary according to the experiences that produced them. While most of the proverbs included in this book are derived from my day-to-day experience as a Palestinian, one must not assume that they invariably reflect universal truth or wisdom. In fact, it is not uncommon to find that some popular proverbs contradict each other. As such, it may be helpful to think of the proverbs in this book as an important reflection of the culture which produced them and as a means for the transmission of certain beliefs, customs and values. These popular proverbs are not only a sacred part of our cultural heritage but represent an enduring tradition to be passed on for many generations to come.

Proverbs as receptacles of traditional wisdom represent one of the great treasure troves of the Arabic language. I use the term “proverb” here to refer to what English speakers normally think of as a “saying” or “aphorism.” As anyone who has spent time around Arabs can attest, proverbs are used frequently in day-to-day social interaction. They are prevalent in daily conversation at home, at school, in religious and cultural ceremonies, and in just about any social situation that may present itself. For Arabs, the central role of

proverbs originates from a universal reverence for language and especially poetry. The Arabic language has enjoyed a long tradition of both secular and religious poetry, beginning with the pre-Islamic *Jabiliyya* poets and continuing today in popular verse. Arabs everywhere take great pride in this tradition and in the Arabic language itself, a pride which is evident in frequent usage of proverbs in literature, the media and every-day conversation.

Given the integral role of proverbs in Palestinian life, and indeed throughout all Arab cultures, the study of such proverbs as used by Palestinians offers a unique perspective on the beliefs and values shared among Arabs. Not only do proverbs provide a historical record of the development of Palestinian civilization throughout time but I also strongly believe that in order to fully know and appreciate our people's culture, history and values one should look to our proverbs. It is often said that culture is a representation of a way of life and a collection of ideas and habits that are learned, shared and transmitted from generation to generation. This is precisely what is reflected in Palestinian proverbs; they express a specific set of beliefs, customs, habits, knowledge and morals handed down throughout time.

With so much international attention fixed on its political conflicts, it is unfortunate that Palestine is known to the world as a land in everlasting turmoil. However, relatively little is known about Palestine as a multicultural nation, a nation where diverse customs and values come together. I believe that studying the culturally rich proverbs of Palestine is one of the more basic and informative ways to promote this cultural education. It is my hope that this book will help all people achieve greater knowledge of this rich cultural tradition and encourage continued learning to promote better understanding. While *Popular Proverbs* has been designed on one hand for students and teachers of Arabic, providing a practical tool for incorporating Arab culture in language teaching, it will also prove to be invaluable for anyone with a general interest in Arab and especially Palestinian culture.

Proverbs can be an extremely functional tool for introducing those learning the Arabic language to Palestinian culture. Current trends in language pedagogy and especially Arabic language pedagogy now recognize the importance of a practical application of the language being taught. Contextual language learning has come to mean not only using language in practical ways but also studying language within the context of its accompanying culture. Language pedagogy across the board has adopted this approach, integrating cultural

elements such as food, music, dance, the visual arts, holidays and religion. As a college professor, I personally use proverbs in my classroom when I teach Arabic to non-native-speaking students as I find that they are a friendly introduction to a different and sometimes confusing foreign culture.

On yet another level, *Popular Proverbs* has appeal for Arabs who have emigrated from the Arab world. Being far from home and family, such émigrés naturally experience nostalgia for the culture of their childhood. *Popular Proverbs* includes stories, cultural background and references which will resonate with Palestinians and other Arabs living abroad, and will evoke strong memories of life in their homeland. But possibly more importantly, I hope that these proverbs and stories will help Arab émigrés continue to pass this rich cultural tradition on to yet another generation and make such life and culture come alive for their children.

It is my hope that the use of this book contributes not only to improved Arabic language pedagogy but also to increased reconciliation and integration among all cultures and societies. By studying something as simple and common as Palestinian proverbs perhaps we can help raise a better awareness of foreign cultures and learn how to interact on a more meaningful level.

فاتحة خير

fat-Hit kheir

Good start

To hit the ground running

Said to acknowledge a good beginning and hope for a similar ending.



حرف الألف

The Letter “alif”

1

إبجد .. تحلا

ibaid .. tiHla

Stay away... you will become sweeter

Absence makes the heart grow fonder

While frequent visiting is typical among the Palestinians, repetitive visits may cause boredom. An extended period of separation, especially among loved ones, may be seen in a positive light since distance awakens the desire to see and spend time with the other. This proverb may be used either as a justification for undesired separation from loved ones or to politely encourage frequent visitors to stay away for a while. It has the same meaning as *kbiff itaam*, or “be light and you will float.”

2

إبجد عن الشرّ و غني له (أو قني له)

ibaid ganish-sharr iw ghannii loh (or: qannii loh)

Keep away from trouble and sing to it

Never trouble trouble till trouble troubles you

It is natural to seek good things for oneself. This proverb, however, urges us to keep away from evil by not interfering in matters that bring it upon us. The expression *ghannii loh* literally means “sing to it” but is often interpreted as “be pleased or sing in order to show happiness.” Perhaps it is better to say *qannii loh*, which literally means “dig a canal for it.” Just as you may change the flow of water by digging a canal, so too may you divert the current of evil.

3

أجا تاكحلها , أعماها

*aja taykaHilha aamaha**He came to apply kohl to the eye and blinded it**Kill them with kindness/**In rendering a service he unintentionally did an injury*

Palestinian women often use kohl, a black powdered resin derived from the burning of olive oil, as an adornment much like eyeliner for blackening the edge of the eyelids and eyebrows. It was also used in the past around the eyes of babies and small children because it was thought to enhance good eye health.

This proverb is said when one ruins what they want to repair, just as one who applies kohl in an effort to become more beautiful may mistakenly introduce the resin directly in the eye and cause blindness. This proverb is often heard when someone misspeaks and subsequently realizes their error. In an attempt to correct the mistake he or she only exacerbates the problem.

4

إذا كان الكلام من فضة .. فالسكوت من ذهب

*idha kana al-kalaam min fiDah fas-sukuut min dohab**If speech is silver, silence is golden*

This proverb is very common among Palestinians. It is said to urge people not to gossip or talk about useless things because such talk could harm the speaker and lead to trouble.

5

إذا كثروا الطباخين .. بتحرق الطبخة “ وبتشيط”

*idha kitruu iTab-bakhiin..ibtinHiriq iTabkha iw “bitshiiT”**Too many chefs burn the food**Too many cooks spoil the broth*

This proverb explains that putting too many people in a position of authority can create conflict and confusion. Usually the differing attitudes stagnate the resolution of the actual issue at hand.

6

إذا لم تستح.. فاصنع ما شئت

idha lam tastaHi faSnaa ma shi-it

If you have no shame, do whatever you please

Whoever has no regard for others (has no shame) will do as he likes

The word “shame” here denotes a sensibility for other people’s feelings. Thus a person who has no shame will do what they want, often acting selfishly or without regard for others. This proverb therefore urges people to be polite and well-mannered.

7

أربط الحصان عند الحمار.. يا بعلمه الشهيق , يا بعلمه التهيق

orboT liHSaan qind liHmaar.. ya biqalmoh ishahiiq ya biqalmoh in-nahiiq

Tether the horse near the donkey, and he will learn either to “bee” or to “ban”

He that lives with wolves will learn to howl

This proverb is said in order to explain that if a well-mannered person interacts regularly with a bad person, the well-mannered person will be influenced first, and will learn bad things which could harm his or her reputation. This proverb exhibits the power of corruption and how such power can easily manipulate others.

8

أربط القرد مطرح ما يقول لك صاحبه

orboT il-qird maTraH may quulak SaHboh

Tie the monkey where his master tells you

An ass must be tied where his master will have him tied

Let things be handled by those who know how they should be done; keep away from things that do not concern you. This proverb originated from a story about the relationship between a man and his monkey: Monkeys are well-known as amusing animals which like to imitate others. They should never be angered since an irate monkey hard to control. One day, there was a monkey that loved his master very much. The master asked his servant to tie the monkey outside the door of his house but the servant tied it to the door inside the house. When the servant left, he closed the door on the tail of the monkey and the monkey died. When the master returned and saw the dead monkey he was very upset.

The servant apologized and walked away repeating *orboT il-qird maTraH may quulak SaHbob*. If the master insists then you must follow and obey.

2

إِسْأَلُ عَنِ الْجَارِ قَبْلَ الدَّارِ

is'al aaniil-jaar qabl id- daar

Choose the neighbor before the house

We can live without friends, but not without neighbors

There are many Palestinian proverbs which address the subject of neighbors. This proverb urges those moving to new locations to ask about the neighbors of the new residence, inquiring whether the people are good or not so that their new life will not be spoiled. In the Palestinian tradition, choosing a good neighbor is more important than choosing a fine house. If the neighbor is good, people tend to say *jiirtob Hilwib*, meaning: Having him as a neighbor is lovely.

The proverb originates from the following story: It was said that a man bought a new house and moved there with his family. On the first day, he heard his neighbor knocking on the door to ask for some salt. He obliged his neighbor. On the next day, he heard knocking again, and sure enough it was his neighbor standing at the door carrying a big container. He greeted his neighbor and asked, "Yes, can I help you?" The neighbor answered, "Yes, there is such a good smell coming out of your house that we figured you must be cooking the head of a lamb, something my pregnant wife is very much craving. Would you please fill this container with meat and soup for us?" The owner of the new house entered his kitchen and poured meat and soup in the big container and gave it to him. Days passed and the neighbor kept knocking at the door asking for something new every day until the new neighbor became frustrated and sold his house at a loss just to escape the neighborhood.

The man started looking for a new house until the real state agent told him: "This is a nice new house, the price is fair and if you like it we can work out a great deal with the owner." The man said: "I do not want to check the house but I want to meet the neighbors." He walked away from the real estate agent while repeating *is'al aaniil-jaar qabl id- daar*.

