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God as Reflected in Gaelic Proverbs

Kate O'Callaghan

Francis Bacon's oft quoted "The genius, wit and spirit of a nation are discovered in its proverbs" has been hotly debated in the world of paremiology. The concept extols the idea that proverbs represent the unique core of a culture and by hearing or reading them an "outsider" can have an insight into this core. However in reality, proverbs which are uniquely "national", are much lower in number than one might first suspect. Proverbs are pithy sayings borne of a people's experience, experiences in some cases very similar regardless of what part of the world they were uttered. This paper is the result of research conducted into God as depicted through Gaelic proverbs. The Irish have a reputation for being strongly religious and this paper will examine this purported religiosity through their native proverbs. A brief summary of the history of Gaelic and idol worship in Ireland will precede the presentation and discussion of proverbs.

Background

There are traces of continuous civilization dating back to Stone Age times or 7000 B.C. in Ireland. Gaelic is an Insular Celtic language and modern day Irish has evolved from a branch of Celtic known as Goidelic¹. Today, Gaelic is the first official language of modern Ireland and

¹ For the purposes of this paper I will use the terms Gaelic (English translation of Gaelige) and Irish interchangeably to refer to the Celtic language spoken in Ireland.

English is listed second in the Constitution. However, the vast majority of the population uses English for day to day life. Only in three large separate pockets of the Northwest, West and Southwest do people conduct their daily affairs in Gaelic. These clusters of Gaelic speakers have had different evolutions from each other in their language so while the base is the same it is not uncommon for different words to have identical meaning. These areas are collectively known as the Gaeltacht and students from the East coast flock there in droves during school holidays to do home stays in order to improve their Irish. In the current educational system Gaelic is a compulsory subject up to the age of 16 which coincides with the end of compulsory education.

Gaelic Language

Gaelic, once the only language spoken in Ireland, has been subverted many times throughout history as the country has a long record of invasions. In most instances the invaders initially disallowed use of the native tongue for official written or spoken communication. This forced it to become a "secretly" spoken language with large periods of time having little written record in Irish. Since the end of the 12th Century, English has been consistently spoken alongside Irish with varying degrees of pervasion. It wasn't until the latter part of the 16th Century through to the end of the 17th Century that Gaelic started showing serious signs of erosion. Throughout this critical period for the language the native ruling classes and their institutions were outlawed and disbanded and replaced with English speakers. This relegated Gaelic to the under-classes which gave rise to the stigma of only the uneducated and poor speaking it. The negative social association of being an Irish speaker meant many favoured English as their spoken language and Gaelic started on its downward spiral.

Gaelic itself has only 18 letters in its alphabet unlike the English 26. This led to different authors using different combinations to transcribe words and gave literary works more of a "regional feel". In 1945 a spelling norm was introduced and was further revised in 1947, anthologies published before this time have been amended in their reprints to reflect the new guidelines although depending on the publisher, it is still possible to find the original spelling in some works.

Idol worship

The history of idol worship can be traced back to the mythical tales of ancient warrior Kings paying homage to the deities of Nature. Ireland remained pagan until 461 when Patrick (now St. Patrick and the patron saint of Ireland) converted many to Christianity. The Irish of the time converted easily. As compared with their Celtic Gods, fearsome monsters who regularly demanded human sacrifice to quell their wrath, the new Christian God was more forgiving of human nature and its propensity to err. Historically Ireland has been referred to as the land of Saints and Scholars given the large number of religious missionaries who went overseas to preach about Christianity after conversion.

It is this biblical God that was encountered most often in the proverbs researched. Indeed many of them were direct translations of proverbs from the Bible and not sayings of the people. Archer Taylor's (1931) comment that "proverbs of primitive people rarely mention divine personages or significant religious matters" and "It is easier to find proverbial illustrations of superstitions than of myths, and mythical figures other than the Devil" rang true when conducting this study.

The main criteria for inclusion in this research were that proverbs specifically mention God. There are other offerings which mention

priests and servants of the church however they will not be included here. While the proverbs researched are not directly from the Bible they retain the same tenets of the Holy Book, namely that God is good, kind, all-seeing and everywhere. Commenting on the Gaelic version of biblical proverbs rather defeats the purpose of this paper for they are not genuinely Irish and versions may be found translated in many Christian countries' repertoire of proverbs.

As mentioned earlier Gaelic started losing its stronghold as the principal language during the 16th and 17th Centuries. English gradually seeped in and exerted a major influence on the daily vernacular. Some Gaelic words and phrases were assimilated into English and vice versa. As was the case with proverbs, Robinson (1994) hypothesizes: 'the borrowings of proverbs were more likely to have gone from English to Irish rather than the opposite way'. This study tries to disregard these obvious translations and focus primarily on proverbs that have their origin in Gaelic literature, poetry or speeches.

These parameters have had two principal effects, the most marked being the reduction in the number of proverbs available and secondly the sayings that are dealt with are more recent in nature due to aforementioned problems with safeguarding the oral tradition in writing.

The proverbs

The Gaelic word for proverb is seanfhocal, (シヤンホカル) which is a compound word made up of two words "Sean" meaning 'old', and "fhocal" meaning word, (sometimes spelt with 'i' to indicate plural) so seanfhocail (シヤンホキル) means "old words".

The following proverbs are examples taken from compilations made by O'Rahilly in the early 1920s. The proverb : Bionn grasta De idir an diallait agus an talamh,

(ピオン グラスタ デ イチイレ アン デイリチアグス アン タリヴェ)

The grace of God is between the saddle and the ground.

In this case grace can be substituted for forgiveness. Forgiveness because the religious notion of "all men are weak and have potential to sin" however God has the power to be there to forgive someone before they die, in the smallest of margins if asked to do so.

God's positive attributes found in the proverbs are balanced out by the need to be wary of your own actions regarding him. Staying up to date in your prayers and asking for forgiveness.

Bionn an aithrige mhall contabhartach -

(ピオン アン アフリゲ ヴァル コンテハタク)

To defer repentance is dangerous.

If you perhaps allow your sins to accumulate before asking for forgiveness you may die before you have a chance to clear your name. Thus arrive in heaven fully burdened. Not found in the Bible, this is more likely to be a priest's warning to his flock rather than a line from a poem. Historically a priest's role in Irish society was an esteemed position. He was in charge of keeping his followers spiritually pure which led to all sorts of creative stories. As Archer Taylor aptly explains "The church fathers quoted and reshaped in more pregnant form the words of biblical wisdom". It is a proverb's brevity, memorability and tendency for simplicity that makes it a sermon writer's ally.

While it was an extra task to cross reference the Gaelic versions of proverbs with their biblical counterparts in order to omit them, it was a lengthy process to ascertain whether the remainder were not simply translations into Gaelic from English. Even still it is difficult to be completely sure of the outcome, as part of the inherent nature of proverbs is their currency and use among "the people". N. P. Morris (1938), points out that many of the Irish proverbs hailing from poems have an

internal rhythm. The Irish bards (poets) had devised intricate internal metrical rhyming systems not unlike the haiku poets of Japan. These rhyming techniques were used to create puns and humour within the poetry. With metrical indicators in mind, a recap of the list revealed a few more genuine articles. Compare if you will the Gaelic sounds of;

Stiuir gach maitheasa gradh De

(スチイル ガク マヘサ グラウ デ)

"The love of God directs everything good"

and the biblical:

Ni hionmhuin le Dia an beal breagach

(ニ ヒオンヴイン レ チア アン ベル ブラガク)

"God loves not a lying tongue"

The former is the first line of a poem by Aonghus Fionn O'Dalaigh (1600) and the latter is taken from the Bible (for aural comparison purposes) and is one of the first lines in a list of things that God is said to loathe. The first employs assonance and has an internal rhythm when spoken. O'Dalaigh's proverb is part of a quatrain which itself is part of a longer poem. This is another common feature of sayings that hail from poetry and literary works. The proverb itself is created by extraction from its original location but not taken in its entirety hence losing its contextuality. Another proverb which falls into our realm of study that has suffered this fate is:

Do mholladh De ne bi tuirseach, bid a ghrasa triall go mhall.

(ド ヴォラク デ ナ ビ チルシャク ビダ グラサ トリアル ゴ ヴァル) Weary not of praising God his Grace will appear eventually. This originally appeared in manuscripts attributed to Mícheál Óg Ó Longáin written in the early 1800s.

Before starting out on this research I had expected to find evidence of the usual back handed wit that is present in so many other Gaelic

proverbs but the offerings related to God were all very simple and pure in meaning with only one possessing the potential to be used sarcastically. We can well imagine a young person making a mistake and an older person raising their eyes to heaven saying:

Ni do gach duine a bhearas Dia an umhluigheacht.

(ニ ド ガク チナ ア ヴィアルス チア アン ウヴィリガクト)

"It is not to everyone God gives cleverness"

However, this possibility for sarcasm depends entirely on the intention and tone of the speaker. An explanation given for the meaning of

Roinneann Dia na subhaidli

ロイニカン チカ ナ スヴェクリ

"God shares out good things"

was intellect to one person riches to another. Just to be sure that everyone has something good in their lives. So while the receiver" of the comment "It is not to everyone God gives cleverness may not be a genius they may have other good things in their circumstances to balance out the lack of intelligence.

Discussion

Another interesting feature was that, as many scholars have noted many proverbs have proverbs which contradict them e.g. The English: "Absence makes the heart grow fonder" vs. "Out of sight, out of mind". Yet none of the God proverbs in Gaelic had any alternative view other than God was good. The closest they came to being dismissive was in their warnings like the aforementioned "To defer repentance is dangerous" if God was meant to forgive easily then not having repented shouldn't pose any problems if the "sinner" at least initiates the process at some stage. Yet this is not directly dismissive, rather a severe warning.

A comment made by Moyne (1989) about the proverbs of Aniocha rings equally true of Irish proverbs. Men are represented in proverbs by all sorts of metaphors however God is never anything else but God and nothing is used to represent him. Christian teaching says that no images should be cast in his name and both cultures seem to have transferred this to their oral tradition by choosing not to substitute anything for God in their proverbs. Archer Taylor (1931) remarks that in comparison to classical Greek proverbs where gods are often mentioned, the proverbs of ancient Rome, avoided mentioning such figures. Similarly, Moyne (1989) observes that "People do not talk idly about whatever they hold in very high esteem".

Sourcing a single proverb through the passage of time is a huge undertaking let alone working through several thousands which appear in compilations labelled "The Proverbs of (insert country's name). Robinson proposes that a proverb can potentially reveal its nationality when it contains one or a combination of three elements: "Local Colour, Stylistic Formulas and National Traits". While the first criteria may be true of sayings using place names and famous people, there is still a possibility of substitution. The second stipulation alludes to proverbs with origins in poetry and prose and pulls more weight. However, "National Traits" have the potential to be characteristics foisted on an entire population by onlookers. Frequently the same underlying ideas are replicated in other cultures by using different figures of comparison in different localities. Take for example the proverb "Labhraidh duine, innsidh Dia "Man speaks but God tells the truth". It has a Latin counterpart of similar ilk, *Homo proponit, Deus disponit* "Man proposes but God disposes" and the removed Islamic counterpart, "The servant plans, but Allah brings to pass," Champion (1963). As always, translating these sayings is not an exact science and proverbs invariably lose some

of their proverbiality once changed to a foreign tongue.

So this has turned out to be quite a limited study. Of the original 19 proverbs found in Gaelic that complied with the first parameter of this study, (directly mentioning God) 15 were clearly sourced from the Bible and only 5 could be sourced back to Irish literature.

To sum up, while it is reverence for God which seems to be most prevalent in the Gaelic proverbs studied, we can barely say with complete conviction that they are of pure Irish concoction. While these offerings have not been directly sourced from the Bible we can see that they are still greatly influenced by the book and echo its sentiments. God continues to command a big part in peoples lives and to this end their sayings reflect their awe and respect of him.

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