

Proverbs for all

Is there still a place for proverbs in the 21st century? When I began to compile *As They Say in Zanzibar*, I asked several people what they thought of proverbs, and met a surprising number of negative reactions. Some thought of proverbs as clichéd expressions. Some saw them as out of date. One person - an Internet geek - told me that he 'wouldn't be seen dead using one', citing 'Too many cooks spoil the broth' as a case in point.

There's a curious double-think operating. I later heard that same geek joking with his friends about the poor military intelligence that had led a certain government to make some bad decisions. 'Garbage in, garbage out', he said. The phrase originated in his IT world: if invalid data (garbage) is entered into a system, the output will also be invalid. During the 1990s, the expression came to be applied to an increasingly varied range of situations. Within a decade, it had taken on proverbial status. My anti-proverbial geek was using a proverb without realizing it.

That proverb told me something about the user's background. And that is what proverbs often do, on a global scale. You can learn a lot about a country's climate from its proverbs. 'You do not know who is your friend or who is your enemy until the ice breaks', they say in Iceland. And references to animals can tell you a lot about ways of life. 'Don't call the alligator a big-mouth till you have crossed the river', they say in Belize.

Proverbs often reflect the specific beliefs and behaviour of a community. 'Do not try to borrow combs from shaven monks', they say in China. And artefacts often give a proverb some local colouring. 'A canoe is paddled on both sides', they say in Nigeria. 'Straps come from the same leather', they say in Argentina. 'Those who cannot build the dyke should hand over the land', they say in - where? Holland, of course.

But in all my explorations, I think some of the most delightful findings were the 'neo-proverbs' used by children. One teacher gave a class of seven-year-olds a list of proverbs, left out the final word or phrase, and asked them to finish it off in their own way. 'Where there's smoke, there's ... pollution', said one. 'A penny saved is ... not much', said another. Out of the mouths of babes, indeed.