15. Riddles
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Riddles and related forms. Style and content. Occasions and uses. Conclusion

It may be surprising to find riddles included in a survey of oral literature. However, riddles in Africa have regularly been considered to be a type of art form, albeit often of minor and childish interest, and have long been included in studies of oral literature. There is some reason for this. As will be seen, riddles often involve metaphorical or poetic comment. This indeed was pointed out long ago by Aristotle when he remarked on the close relation of riddles to metaphorical expression (Rhetoric iii.2 (1405b)).

In Africa riddles are common and have been extensively collected. They are often very closely related to proverbs. Like proverbs they are expressed briefly and concisely; they involve analogy, whether of meaning, sound, rhythm, or tone; and the two forms are sometimes even combined in the ‘proverb-riddle’. Riddles also sometimes have close connections with other aspects of literary expression—with such forms as enigmas and dilemma tales, with stories and epigrams, and with praise names. In spite of such connections, however, riddles emerge as a distinct type of literary expression in most African cultures, often one considered to be the special domain of children and, unlike proverbs, to be for entertainment rather than for serious consideration.

1 ‘Good riddles do, in general, provide us with satisfactory metaphors: for metaphors imply riddles, and therefore a good riddle can furnish a good metaphor’ (quoted in Georges and Dundes 1963: 116).
2 The local word for riddle sometimes also covers other forms of literature, e.g. Yoruba ajo (riddle, story), Efik nke (story, riddle, tongue-twister, proverb), but it is common for there to be a distinct term (sometimes in addition to a more general one), e.g. in Nyanja, Mbandu, Dogon, Lyele, etc.
In a general way ‘riddles’ are readily distinguishable by their question-and-answer form and by their brevity. However, a preliminary point must be made here. The popular European or American picture of a riddle is of an explicit question to which a respondent must try to puzzle out the correct answer. African riddles are not altogether like this. The ‘question’ is usually not an interrogative at all in form but, outwardly at least, is a statement. An answer is expected but very often the listeners are not directly asked to guess but merely faced with an allusive sentence referring analogously to something else, which they must then try to identify. The point, furthermore, is normally in some play of images, visual, acoustic, or situational, rather than, as in many English riddles, in puns or plays on words.

There are many different forms. Very often the riddle is in the simple form of a phrase or statement referring to some well-known object in more or less veiled language. Examples of such simple riddles seem to occur all over the continent. There is the Tonga ‘Little things that defeat us—Mosquitoes’, Malum ‘Water standing up—Sugar-cane’, Fulani ‘Be born; come morning, give birth—Fresh milk’ (because milk is left overnight before making butter), Shona ‘The little wildcat in the long grass—Scissors’, or the Lamba ‘The house in which one does not turn round—The grave’ (Fell n.d.; Harries 1942b: 282; Arnott 1957: 382; Fortune 1951: Doke 1934: 363). The Nyanja have a characteristic series of riddles in which not only the answer but the question consists of one word only—‘Invisible!—The wind’, ‘Innumerable—Grass’ (Gray 1939: 258, 261; for similar or identical examples see Dewar 1900).

In most of these riddles, what is required is that the answerer should identify the object indicated in these allusive general statements. In fact many riddles need a double process to solve them, for the analogy in the initial statement may not be immediately obvious; therefore the solver must first select the salient features of the object or situation mentioned.

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3 There are a few genuine exceptions to this, but some of the apparently interrogative forms that are sometimes published seem to be due to the European collector’s conscious or unconscious imposition of the form more familiar to him. The great majority of these who have explicitly paid attention to the form of riddles in Africa are agreed that the typical pattern is not an interrogative one (For some exceptions see Simmons 1955: 422; Bascom 1949: 7ff. (Yoruba)).

4 The initial statement that poses the problem will be referred to as question even though this usage is clearly not strictly accurate.
and then go on to identify a similar object. A good example is the Fulani riddle ‘I threw a lance, it flew over seven rivers and went and speared the Chief of Masina’s bull’, where the answer is ‘A vulture’, the salient features being the fact that it goes far and lands on an animal. Many other examples of such analogies could be cited—for example, the Karanga riddles ‘My father’s little hill which is easily destroyed—Porridge’ because of the way porridge is heaped up on the plate and soon eaten, or ‘A flame in the hill—A leopard’, and the Zezuru ‘The little chap who plays the typewriter—The tongue’ (Hunt 1952: 94, 96; Fortune 1951: 39).

In these simple riddles, then, some generalization or some image is suggested and the answer involves pointing to the particular object implied. The answer here is the name of the object indicated, often just one word, and the analogy is one of meaning; the respondent must recognize the similarity of situation, character, or behaviour in the statement and its answer.

This type seems to be the most common African form. But there are also other cases in which the analogy involved is not of meaning but of rhythm, sound, or tone, often with a longer reply. These forms must now be considered.

Sometimes there is a rhythm or balance between question and reply. Among the Thonga, for example, one riddle runs ‘Over there smoke goes up, over there smoke goes up’, to which the reply, in balancing structure, is ‘Over there they mourn over a chief, over there they mourn over a poor man’ (Junod and Jaques 1936). Junod speaks of many other Thonga riddles in which there is a kind of rhythm in the syllables so that the questions and answers are like ‘two little verses, balancing each other in a poetical way’ (Junod 1938) a form of riddle distinguished in the native terminology from the one-word-answer type. Similar ‘strophic’ riddles are recorded among the Transvaal Sotho (Endemann 1937–38; cf. Cole-Beuchat 1957: 144–5), a form reminiscent of the similarly balanced proverbs so common in the same areas.

Besides rhythm, the analogy may take the form of tone resemblance between question and reply. This has been recorded, for instance, from the Luvalve of Zambia (White 1958), the Luba of the Congo (Van Avermaet 1955), and the Ibibio-Efik group of Southern Nigeria (Simmons 1956, 1958).

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5 Arnott 1957: 381. This article is one of the best analyses of African riddles and is drawn on largely here.
6 Not all the so-called ‘tone riddles’ he gives are, in fact, characterized by marked resemblance in tone. Efik ‘tone riddles’ on Simmons’s own showing (1958) include...
In these riddles, occurring in languages in which tonality is a significant feature, the question and answer are marked by identical or similar tonal patterns. The Ibibio tone riddles described by Simmons are characterized by their erotic content or allusions, practically all containing some reference to vagina, clitoris, or coition, as in the riddles ‘Big ships—Big clitoris’ and ‘Sun shines (and) come hits ground (and) splits—Vagina opens (and) come takes fly (and) chews’, each characterized by exact or nearly exact tones in each part (Simmons 1956: 80; 82). Simmons gives only very literal translations. Not all tone riddles have this erotic content: Luvale ones, for instance, do not (White 1958). But they all share the characteristic that the analogy between statement and reply is primarily one of form—tone and perhaps rhythm—rather than meaning.

So far at least, tone riddles have been infrequently recorded. Other acoustic images, on the other hand, are very common indeed. Very often the ‘question’ consists of just one word or phrase to suggest the answer through its sound alone. This sound may be one that gives a direct onomatopoeic impression even to foreigners. In the Kamba riddle ‘Seh!’ the answer is ‘A needle stabbed the sand’, for the question imitates the sound made by a needle dropping point first into the sand (Lindblom iii, 1934: 26), a riddle not unlike the similar Limba one from the other side of the continent, ‘Sengsekede’, answered ‘You cannot put a needle on a rock’ (because the sound of sengysekede suggests the sound made by the needle when it falls over). More often the acoustic analogy implicit in the question is not immediately obvious, for ideophones conventionally recognized in one culture are used to convey an acoustic image to members of that culture. Thus the Makua riddle ‘Eiya eyeya’, an ideophone representing a state of life, is answered ‘An orphan’, the Fulani ‘Kerbu kerbu njolla’ represents ‘Goats’ feet on hard ground’ (Harries 1942b: 287; Arnott 1957: 381ff.), the Thonga have ‘Shigiligigi shigi’—The rain of early morning’, and the Kamba ‘Aa’ is answered ‘The old man drank a little milk in the dry season’—the sound conventionally suggesting the man’s intense thirst and his enjoyment of the milk (Junod and Jaques 1936 no. 159; Lindblom iii, 1934: 7). In none of these is the connection a ‘natural’ one that could be recognized by someone unacquainted with the culture.

several with ‘dissimilar tones’, so that it may be misleading to overemphasize the tonal aspect and ignore other possible analogies such as, perhaps, rhythm or similarities in structure between question and answer.
Besides composing the whole question, there are also ideophones and nonsense-words suggesting some acoustic image that appear as just one part. The Mwera riddle, for example, ‘Ndendende the plaiter of a mat’ is answered by ‘A hornet’; the ideophone ndendende suggests the way the hornet moves its hindquarters rapidly in filling its hole for egg-laying, just as the leaves shake about when someone makes a mat (Harries 1947: 24). In Karanga the riddle ‘Magiregede walks as if he were proud’ is solved by ‘A wagon’ because of the onomatopoeic word imitating the sound of wagon wheels on a road (Hunt 1952: 91), while the process of going to the spring with an empty pot and coming back with a full one is suggested by the sounds in ‘To go u, to return i’, where u in Shona represents the empty sound, i the full one (Fortune 1951: 42). Sometimes both acoustic and visual images are combined in a riddle as in the Fulani example explained by Arnott Tiisiinii taasaanaa siradel woogana—The gait of a large pigeon in sand”; the long-drawn-out words, with a few short syllables in between, correspond to the image of feet dragging through sand with occasional hops; the high-tone and close vowels of tiisiinii alternating with the low-tone open vowels of taasaanaa represent the pigeon’s gait, swaying from side to side (Arnott 1957: 381).

The characteristic form of riddles in Africa, then, is for some analogy to be recognized between question and answer, most frequently an analogy of meaning or of sound, with simple one-word reply, but also occasionally longer forms involving tonal and rhythmic correspondence. Though less fully documented than proverbs, many collections of riddles of this form have been made from all parts of the continent.

There are, however, certain other specialized forms which appear to occur only rarely (or else have proved less accessible to collectors) and often overlap to a larger extent with other forms of oral literature. They will only be treated very briefly here.

First, among some peoples riddles may be particularly closely connected with proverbs, so that either the answer or even both parts of the riddle are sayings accepted in other contexts as proverbs. One group of riddles recorded from Leopoldville stands out as being integrally connected with proverbial sayings.7 Thus change of fortune and the mortality of all men are brought out in the two proverb-riddles ‘La terre tourne—Tu possèdes, tu seras privé’ and ‘Toi qui te couches sur un lit et moi qui me

7 Referred to as devinettes-proverbes by Comhaire-Sylvain (1949b).
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couche sur une natte—Nous sortirons (de ce monde) par le même chemin’ (Comhaire-Sylvain 1949: 51). Similar instances have been recorded from Southern Nigeria. In a number of the Efik ‘tone riddles’ the response is said to be a proverb (Simmons 1958: 125), while the neighbouring Anang Ibibio have a distinct class of proverb-riddles distinguished from their simple riddles, which are only to amuse. In these both portions of the riddle consist of a proverb. One example is ‘The vine grows along the edge of the pit—He is made to speak in public’. This is explained by the fact that the Anang take a great pride in eloquence and their children are early trained to develop verbal skills; the proverb instructs children to attempt public speaking as early as possible, but at the same time recognizes that this is difficult for them: just as a vine has to struggle to grow along the edge of a hole (and not into it, which would be easier but would cut off the sun), so a child must struggle to overcome his shyness and endeavour to speak (Messenger 1960: 229). Though proverb-riddles have not been widely reported as a distinct named type, it is possible that proverbs may in fact turn out to occur more frequently than realized in connection with riddles, either explicitly or by allusion, so that in a full analysis of the literature of any one people proverbs and riddles should really be treated in conjunction. Among some of the Central Bantu, for instance, a common riddle that occurs in various forms—‘Something I threw over to the other side of the river—Eyes’, the Ila form (in Smith and Dale ii, 1920: 330)—recalls the equally common proverb ‘The eye crosses a full river’, metaphorically signifying that desire goes beyond the possible.

A similar overlap of forms is the way in which praise names occasionally occur in riddles. Thus among the Tlokwa the common praise name for cattle—‘God with a watery nose’—is said also to occur as a riddle, the answer being ‘An ox’ (Nakene 1943: 135). The Hausa riddle referring to a camel is also clearly in the style of a praise term—‘Largest of beasts, devilish property, everyone who loses you has to look for you’ (Merrick 1905: 80). Again, this sort of connection may turn out to be widespread.

In South Africa we hear of the ‘bird riddle’ (Jordon 1958: 102–3). This is a kind of competitive dialogue between two boys or young men in front of an audience. Each has to prove he ‘knows the birds’ by making an assertion about one, then an analogy likening it to a type of person. Each in turn

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8 Messenger gives eighteen other examples of these proverb-riddles, with full explanations of each.
9 cf. also praise names in Lyele riddling (Nicolas 1954: 1015) and in Efik (Simmons: 422).
tries to show that he ‘knows’ more birds than his opponent. In this game ‘freshness of idea, wit and humour count more than just the number of birds named’ (Jordon 1958: 103). Thus a competitor with the following was declared the winner with a single attempt:

Challenger.  What bird do you know?
Proposer.  I know the white-necked raven
Challenger.  What about him?
Proposer.  That he is a missionary.
Challenger.  Why so?
Proposer.  Because he wears a white collar and a black cassock, and is always looking for dead bodies to bury.  (Jordan 1958: 103)

Song-riddles occur among the Makua (Harries 1942a), a form said to be unrecorded elsewhere in Africa (though see Raum 1940: 221 (Chaga); Ghilardi 1966: 183–5 (Kikuyu). These riddles (ikano) differ from ordinary ones in that they are in the form of action songs accompanying a dance and have a didactic purpose closely connected with initiation rituals. An expert improviser leads the singing, and the solution of some of the song-riddles are known only to him; it is forbidden for initiates who have learnt these riddles to tell them to the non-initiated. Many of these song-riddles include sexual references or allusions to the initiation rituals. In ‘The handle of the hoe is bent, let him be adze-ed—The seed of the baobab tree’, the seed is compared to a piece of wood which needs to be straightened so that a hoe can be fixed on (a baobab seed is cleft down the middle); the parallel is to a disobedient person who needs to be straightened by initiation rites (Harries 1942a: 33). In another, ‘A woman smoothly seducing (ntiya ntiya), by the grinding, the grinding, the grinding’, the answer is ‘A helmeted shrike’; ntiya is an ideophone for the way in which the woman grinds seductively to attract the man she wants, and she is compared to the helmeted shrike which knows no fear of people (Harries 1942a: 36). A final example contains an instruction to initiates to avoid incest—‘The sweet stalk of millet within the boundary however sweet I shan’t break it’, answered by ‘Blood relationship’ (Harries 1942a: 44).

Besides their occasional connections with songs, praise names, and proverbs, riddles also sometimes shade into other forms of oral literature. They have obvious connections with enigmas, puzzles, and dilemma stories and in some societies the same term refers to all of these. Among the Ila of Zambia, for instance, there is a series of enigmas with the
same question, ‘You who are (or have grown) so clever!’, with a series of possible answers. The point is to be ‘a kind of catechism challenging the self-complacency of men who think they know everything’ (Smith and Dale ii, 1920: 330). This is brought out in the responses: ‘When the milk of your cows is put together you can’t tell which is which’, ‘You can’t tie water in a lump’, ‘Can you catch hold of a shadow?’, ‘Can you follow up a road to where it ends?’, ‘Can you put an ugly person back into the womb to be reborn handsome?’ (Smith and Dale ii, 1920: 330–1) 5

The Ila also have conundrums like, for instance, the puzzle about who should be the one left to perish of a man, his wife, and their two mothers when they reach a river across which only three can be ferried; each possible combination having been found unacceptable, the final answer is that they all had to sit on the bank and die together! (Smith and Dale ii, 1920: 332–3) Similar puzzles, as well as the longer dilemma stories, are widespread. Less common are the epigrams that occur among the Fulani as a form closely connected with both riddles and proverbs. They share the characteristics of grouping together a number of phenomena that have some basic similarity or illustrate some general principle in the same way as riddles. Thus in one example quoted by Arnott a list of similia is given preceded by a statement of the general principle linking them:

Three exist where three are not:
Commoner exists where there is no king, but a kingdom cannot exist where there are no commoners;
Grass exists where there is nothing that eats grass, but what eats grass cannot exist where no grass is;
Water exists where there is nothing that drinks water, but what drinks water cannot exist where no water is. (Arnott 1957: 384)

Several other examples, including a threefold classificatory epigram, are quoted by Arnott, who points out their similarity in certain respects to both proverbs and riddles. They recall the striking Hausa saying classified as a riddle by Fletcher but with much in common with the Fulani epigrams: ‘Three things are like three things but for three things: Sleep is like death but for breathing; marriage is like slavery but for wifely respect; a guinea-fowl is like grey cloth but for being alive’ (Fletcher 1912: 51). 10

10 A somewhat similar riddle-type classification is found in the Galla hymn in which six ‘wonders’ are listed (Chadwicks iii, 1940: 553).
II

These longer and more complex forms are, however, relatively rare, and most of the remaining discussion about style and language will be concerned with the more common simple riddle where some analogy is drawn, usually of sound or sense, between a brief question and often briefer answer.

There are various approaches to the analysis of style and form in riddles. Those interested in ‘structural analysis’ have pointed to certain basic elements in riddles and the way these are related to one another. In particular Georges and Dundes pick out the ‘descriptive element’ in the question, the ‘referent’ of which has to be guessed. Many riddles consist of more than one such descriptive element; for example, ‘It has a head / but can’t think——Match’ has two elements. These two, in turn, may be in opposition to each other (as in the common European type such as ‘What has legs / but cannot walk?—Chair’). Furthermore, the opening question may be either literal or metaphorical in terms of its solution. This becomes clear with some examples. A riddle like ‘I know something that sleeps all day and walks all night——A spider’ is to be counted as a literal form; whereas ‘Two rows of white horses on a red hill——Teeth’ is metaphorical in that the solution (teeth) and the subject of the descriptive element (horses) are different and are only analogous through a metaphor. Following this analysis one can thus distinguish between different types of riddles in terms of (i) oppositional / non-oppositional (further divided into three sub-types), and (2) literal / metaphorical.

This kind of analysis can be applied to African riddles. It seems in general that the typical European oppositional type is not nearly so common in Africa where, if we adopt these ‘structural’ terms, non-oppositional riddles are by far the most frequent. A metaphorical rather than a literal emphasis too seems to be to the fore. However, when we reach this point we find we have to extend some of these structural elements, in the sense that, as

11 Especially Georges and Dundes 1963 (from whom the following examples are taken) and Gowlett 1966. (For an alternative analysis and critique of Georges and Dundes see Scott 1965).
12 For further details and elucidation see articles cited and further references given there.
13 See instances throughout this chapter and the discussion in Gowlett, op. cit. For an exception to this, see a number of the Yoruba riddles discussed by Bascom, which are based on a pattern of ‘two statements which appear to be mutually contradictory, incongruous or impossible’ (Bascom 1949: 4). There are also a number of scattered exceptions, including some of those cited in this chapter.
described earlier, analogies of sound, tone, or rhythm have also to be taken into account in many African riddles in addition to analogy in terms of content. This kind of generalized structural analysis, then, can be helpful up to a point in studying African riddles, but beyond that we have to turn to more detailed accounts.

When we come to the precise style in which riddles are expressed, it quickly becomes obvious that this tends to vary from culture to culture according to the favourite forms current at any particular time. Thus in parts of West Africa (e.g. Hausa, Fulani) reference to the number three is common in both proverbs and riddles; among the Makua many of the simple riddles open with ‘I went to my friend and . . .’, as in ‘I went to my friend and he gave me a black chain—(Black) driver ants’ (Harries 1942b: 279); the Kamba have a series opening ‘I was about to . . .’; the Zulu apparently like long riddles; while the Thonga make frequent use of the opening tseke-tseke (Lindblom iii, 1934: 26–7; Callaway 1868: 364–74; Junod and Jaques 1936).

However, in spite of this great variation in style, there are certain typical stylistic patterns that seem to have a very wide distribution. The initial statement which serves as the ‘question’ is sometimes preceded by some such phrase as ‘Guess what . . .’ or by some stereotyped formula introducing a whole session of riddling. Very often, however, the statement is not itself accompanied by any explicit indication that a solution has to be found. The answer is typically in the form of a single word, but longer phrases and sentences occur even in simple riddles. Among the Lamba, for instance, a characteristic reply is in the form of a question as in their version of a common Bantu riddle ‘That which has no ending—What of the path, who has ever come to the end of it?’14

Within riddles themselves, there are also some typical patterns. The thing alluded to in the question is often referred to in terms of some other specific (and favourite) noun. This will be clear from some examples. Among the Tlokwa a common form of expression is in terms of cattle, so that the referent is veiled by being called ‘our cow’ or ‘cattle’: ‘Black cattle which stay in a forest—Lice’ and ‘My father’s cow is green outside and black inside—Reed’ (Nakene 1943: 136; 134) are only two of many examples.15 The Ngala use ‘A chief

15 Names of other animals are contrasting, however, surprisingly uncommon in the question part of riddles, with their frequent appearance in stories and proverbs.
in a similar way (e.g. ‘Un chef avec des boutons sur tout le corps—L’ananas’) and the Bambara ask about ‘Ce petit homme’ (Comhaire-Sylvain 1949: 43; Travelé 1923: 50–3). Proper names of people, or sometimes of places, are not uncommon in this context, occurring, for example, among the Lyele of Upper Volta, the Yoruba of Nigeria, and the Shona of Southern Rhodesia where a question about ‘The thing of so-and-so’ is frequent (Fortune 1951: 32). The first person singular (pronoun or possessive) also constantly appears. Most common of all is the use of kinship terms in reference. ‘Father’ or ‘My father’ seems to be the most popular of all (occurring frequently in the riddles of peoples as far apart as, for example, the Limba, Lyele, and Yoruba of West Africa, the Fang of West Equatorial Africa, the Ngala of the Congo, and the Shona and Tlokwa of Central and southern Africa). Other kin, too, frequently appear—mother, children, grandfather, even affines—as in the Shona ‘Your staggering, Mr. Son-in-law, where did you drink beer?—The chameleon’ (Fortune 1951: 34).

The language of riddles is sometimes said to be archaic and certainly often contains apparently meaningless words. Puns and word play are not a significant aspect, but appear occasionally, for instance in Yoruba riddles (Bascom 1949: 5). As will already be obvious from examples cited, the language of riddles is also marked by a frequent use of reduplication, ideophones, and diminutives (occasionally augmentatives) that take the form either of special prefixes, as in Nyanja, or of separate adjectives conveying the idea of small-ness, usually applied to the main noun in the question.16

In general form riddles seem to represent a relatively fixed type of oral literature. Their stereotyped brevity offers little opportunity for variation or elaboration and there is little if any stress on performance. The creative aspect may in any case be limited, in that simple riddles are so often the domain of children. However, occasional variant forms have been recorded between which individuals can choose,17 and several authorities mention the fact that new riddles are constantly being made, presumably within the general and particular stereotypes just discussed (see eg Schapera 1932: 217; Smith and Dale ii, 1920: 324; Bascom 1949: 5).

In content, riddles can include just about every sphere of natural and human life, and vary according to the preoccupations and customs of

16 On linguistic structure see Cole-Beuchat 1957: 142ff.
17 e.g. the three versions of the Limba acoustic riddle where the ideophone kikirikokori suggests the great size of a pregnant woman. (Finnegan 1967: 339)
the society in which they are told. An understanding of the point of a riddle thus often depends on a knowledge of the ways of a particular society. The Nuer riddle, for instance, ‘Guess what big man it is near whom they have the wedding talk but he never makes a remark—It is a barn’ is explained by the fact that among the Nuer, wedding negotiations commonly take place near a barn (Huffman 1931: 105). Some of the stock comparisons suggested in the questions have already been mentioned—‘my father’, ‘our cow’, etc.—and the answers, according to which collections of riddles are often classified, range from the human body, tools and implements, and domestic life, to examples from the animal and vegetable world, crops, and natural phenomena like the moon or stars. Many riddles give vivid visual impressions, particularly those about the natural world, which often indicate close observation. The Nyanja, for instance, have a riddle about the fly, ‘The chief from the north when walking says, where I came from is good, where I go to is good’—because the house-fly’s habit of rubbing its front and back legs together alternatively suggests to the Nyanja a feeling of satisfaction (Gray 1939: 263). The Kgatla riddle ‘Tell me: a green cow which bears white calves—It is the mimosa tree’ gives a vivid picture of the white thorns on the green tree, while a Thonga riddle compares the wild apricot’s root to ‘A red copper bangle’ (Schapera 1932: 220; Junod 1938: 40). There is evidence of more imaginative observation in the Makua riddle about the moon—‘A very beautiful thing which (if you) say to it, Come on, something inside it refuses’ (Harries 1942b: 276).

There are some stock subjects that occur widely whatever the other variations. One of the most common is that of the various staple crops—maize, millet, yams, etc.—in different parts of the continent. Another is that of the sexual and obscene references which are so common in riddles that Doke, in his general description of Bantu riddles, can say that many of them ‘take the place of the lewd joke of other communities’ (Doke 1947: 118). Many examples could be cited of this. The erotic Ibibio riddles have already been mentioned (Simmons 1956). The Lamba too have many obscene riddles, while the Shona specialize in riddles characterized by their suggestiveness but to which the real answers are always in fact innocent (Fortune 1951: 31). Others are more outspoken, like the Bambara ‘Ce petit homme se mit en colère, dansa longuement jusqu’à en vomir; lorsqu’il eut vomi, il mourut—Le membre viril’ (Travélé 1923: 53). Besides such stock topics, certain riddles with the same content but different forms sometimes have a wide circulation.
Among the Bantu, for instance, Doke notices the very frequent occurrence, in various versions, of a riddle about an egg (‘A house without any door’.) and about hair, e.g. ‘I sowed my big field and reaped it, and my hand was not full’ (Doke 1947: 118).

III

The occasions for the asking of simple riddles are strikingly similar throughout Africa. There are two main situations in which they occur. Riddle-asking is often a prelude to the telling of stories, typically by children in the evening before the rather more serious narrations commence; sometimes, as among the Fang, riddles are asked between stories, partly to allow the professional story-tellers some respite in their lengthy narrations (Tardy 1933: 282; 294). The other very common occasion is a game of riddling, usually among children; this is conducted according to special rules and formulas and is often highly competitive. Again it takes place most typically in the evening.18

Competitive riddling has been extensively described for many of the Bantu-speaking peoples. In southern Africa it not infrequently takes the form of a contest between two teams. Among the Tlokwa, for instance, the children are divided into two groups as they sit round the fire in the winter when it is too cold to be outdoors, and the first group to start goes on asking until the other side can no longer answer (Nakene 1943: 126). Among some other Bantu peoples such as the Nyanja the competition is between individuals, not teams. Schapera describes the game as played among the Kgatla: if two children are involved, one begins asking the other, and continues until the other is unable to answer; the second then says ‘Let the buyers come’ and questions in turn; when the other fails he says ‘Tell me yours’, and there is an exchange of the riddles each had not known. A similar process is followed when several children are playing, with a division into sides which ‘buy’ the unknown riddles from each other, the more skillful side taunting their opponents (Schapera 1932: 216). This fiction of having to ‘pay’ in return for the un-guessed answer is a fairly common theme. Among the Nyanja in Central Africa the pretended recompense is cattle (‘We pay up oxen.’ ‘How many?’ ‘Such-and-such a number’ (Werner 1906: 214) while in Kenya the one giving up has to name a town (‘Give me a town’—‘Go to Mombasa’, etc. (Hollis 1917: 135) Similarly in West

18 On time and place for riddles in Bantu see especially Cole-Beuchat 1957: 133–5.
Equatorial Africa Mbete children have to ‘pay’ a village (Adam 1940: 134; see also Lukas 1937: 163 (Kanuri), Calame-Griaule 1965: 471–2 (Dogon), Berry 1961: 16n.).

Such riddling competitions are often conventionally preceded by special formulas which are surprisingly alike throughout the Bantu area: in Lamba, for instance, the propounder says tyo (‘guess’) while the other replies kakesa (‘let it come’) or kamuleta (‘bring it’), and then the riddles are asked (Doke 1934: 362); the Nyanja lead off riddle-sessions round the communal fire with cilape! (‘a riddle!’) answered by nacize! (‘let it come!’) and a shout of wafa (‘he has died’) when the right answer is given (Gray 1939: 253–4); and innumerable similar examples could be cited from Bantu-speaking peoples.19

Elsewhere, in West Africa for instance, riddles are asked before or during performances of stories or songs. Even where there is apparent similarity to the Bantu pattern with introductory formulas before riddling sessions, the practice is very different because of the absence of the competitive element. Among the Anang Ibibio of Southern Nigeria, for instance, riddle-asking is preceded by special introductory formulas, posed by an individual, then answered in unison by the group. The riddles are not told to baffle the audience or stimulate them to guess, for the answers are all known; even when a new one is invented, the originator adds the reply with the question instead of asking for a solution. The emphasis is very much on communal entertainment rather than competition: ‘The enjoyment of a riddle derives from the sharing of it by members of a group rather than from the challenge to the imagination it presents’ (Messenger 1960: 226).

Riddles also occasionally occur in other contexts. Among the Lamba, and perhaps other peoples, riddles are sometimes referred to in speeches as a striking way of holding people’s attention, and thus contribute to the literary richness of oratory (Doke 1934: 362). In addition to the Makua song-riddles, even simple riddles sometimes have connections with initiation, as among the Tlokwa where the special language learnt in the initiation ceremonies is connected with riddles.20

To some extent riddles also appear in various spheres of everyday life. Among the Chaga, riddles can be used to influence someone’s action

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19 See also Doke 1947: 117; Werner in Hollis 1917: 135–6; Cole-Beuchat 1957: 137.
through irony or indirect suggestion, to imply a threat without actually stating it, or to convey secret information (Messenger 1960: 225–6). This kind of usage somewhat resembles that of proverbs and seems more usual with the complex forms than with the more simple riddle mainly used by children. The Anang proverb-riddles, for example, are used, like proverbs, by people of both sexes and all ages in a multitude of social situations and are expected to instruct as well as amuse (Raum 1940: 219), while among the neighbouring Efik the complex tone riddles, with their proverbial replies can be used for oblique cursing, humorous greeting, succinct explanation of an action, and to embarrass women through their erotic content (Simmons 1958: 124).

However, such everyday usages are relatively rare. Conventionally riddle-telling is a social pastime, for amusement pure and simple. This aspect of riddling is brought out by two further points about its occasions. First, it tends to be a separate and restricted activity. It is very common in all parts of Africa for there to be a general rule—not always strictly observed, but a rule nevertheless—that riddle-telling should take place in the evening and not during the day; in East Central Africa there is sometimes the further limitation that riddling should not take place during certain phases of the farming year (Fortune 1951: 30; ten Raa 1966: 391). Riddles are thus, unlike proverbs, regarded as a kind of marginal activity reserved for special times rather than a universal aspect of human activity and communication. Secondly, it is generally children who are expected to take an interest in the light-hearted asking of riddles. There are some exceptions to this. Among the Yoruba, for example, both children and adults are said to enjoy riddles although they are especially popular with young children (Gbadamos and Beier 1959: 53; Bascom 1949: 7), while Kamba adults, even more than children, compete in riddling; two outstanding riddle experts are described as exchanging ‘riddles and answers with a rapidity resembling two skilled fencers making thrusts and parries’ (Lindblom iii, 1934: 4). However, these situations are not common. More generally, riddles are associated with children’s amusement in contrast to the more serious use of proverbs by their elders.

The explicit purpose of riddles, then, is almost invariably amusement. Commentators have, however, predictably pointed to many of their incidental functions as well. Besides entertainment, riddles are sometimes claimed to play an indirect educational role by training children in quick
thinking, in intellectual skill, and in classification,\textsuperscript{21} providing, through their sexual or comic bias, a release from tensions imposed by the moral and social code (Dupire and Tressan 1955), or leading to a fuller participation in social life.\textsuperscript{22} They are also like proverbs, sometimes used as an indirect means of saying something without the risk involved in stating it explicitly. These points have been frequently mentioned. Less common are the incidental functions of the more complex riddles as a form of communication, an esoteric accomplishment associated with initiation, and the encouragement of either sharing or competitiveness implicit in various forms of riddling. In the various societies these indirect functions of riddle-asking have greater or lesser significance. What all seem to share, however, is the explicit assumption that riddles, or at least the simple form of riddles, are primarily for entertainment and, unlike proverbs, not for any deeper purpose.

\section*{IV}

Like proverbs, riddles represent a concise form of conventionally stereotyped expression. Though in some ways riddles can be regarded as a relatively minor and crude form of art, suitable merely for children, they nevertheless have some relevance for the general literary background. This comes out partly through the connections of riddles with literary forms like proverbs, epigram, praise names, and rhetoric. More significantly, the imagery and poetic comment of even the simple riddles are clearly part of the general literary culture. Insight into the nature of people’s behaviour can be expressed in a poem or a story—or in a riddle. The Kgatla say ‘Tell me: two civet cats which when they fight are not to be separated—It is a married couple’, while the Kamba show their insight in ‘Matters of importance—Children’s secrets’ (Schapera 1932: 227; Lindblom iii, 1934: 18). There is the Ila comment on humankind with ‘It is far—And it’s a long way to God!’ , while the Bambara and Lamba express their view of man in ‘Quelle est la plus rapide de toutes les choses?—La pensée’, and ‘That which digs abut in the deserted village—The heart’ (which always turns to think of the past) (Smith and Dale ii, 1920: 330; Travelé 1923: 51; Cole-Beuchat 1957: 146). That paradox too can be conveyed vividly in the brief words of a riddle can

\textsuperscript{21} As in the ‘structural’ interpretation by Hamnett 1967.

\textsuperscript{22} For an excellent discussion of this last point see Blacking 1961.
be illustrated from the Hausa ‘A prince on an old mat—A kola nut’ in which we are given a vivid picture of the way the beautiful pink or white kola-nut, so valued a commodity, are exposed for sale in the market on a piece of old matting (Fletcher 1912: 51).

Most of all riddle, however simple, involve a play of images, visual and acoustic, through which insights and comment can be expressed. In this way, even this very minor form of art, with its own stylistic peculiarities in different cultures, has its part to play in the richness of oral literature in African societies.23


23 Though riddles tend to be recorded in rather smaller numbers than proverbs, there is still a large number of collections, too many to catalogue here. Useful bibliographies can be found in Doke 1947, Nicolas 1954, Cole-Beuchat 1957, Bascom 1964. See also Aranzadi 1962 and, among many others short articles, Jacobs 1962b, du Toit 1966, Ittmann 1930, Bynon 1966–67.