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"ANIMALS ARE KILLED BY THEIR SPOOR AND MEN BY THEIR WORDS": THE RHETORIC OF SPEECH AND SILENCE IN PHALEE PROVERBS

Abstract: This paper analyses Phalee proverbs that refer to acts of speaking and holding the tongue in a community rhetorical context. Phalee/ Phadang, spoken in the Ukhrul district of Manipur, falls under the Tangkhul Naga language sub-group of the Tibeto-Burman family but is mutually incomprehensible with it. Tangkhul is the lingua franca among the villages that make up the Tangkhul Naga identity despite every village's quotidian language use, rituals, and laws being unique to the village identity. This is a complex phenomenon, and the proverbs that arise out of the Tangkhul-Phalee composite provide interesting perspectives on identity formation regarding language, custom, and art. The collected corpus of proverbs we studied shows that while speech is considered clearly a necessity in terms of self-expression, community policy determination, and social interaction, most proverbs on speaking nevertheless emphasise the power of spoken words and ultimately counsel minimal and extremely careful speech. Silence seems to be often and poignantly granted greater value in communal life. This paper explores how these accumulated insights into speech reflect cultural attitudes in Phalee society and offer insights into the distinctive forms of social governance as mediated through the rhetorical strategies of proverb context and usage that characterise the village identity.

Keywords: Phalee, proverbs, speech, culture and traditional wisdom

1. Introduction

"Proverbs are more than an index of men's lives; they are also the record of their vocabulary, so that it is unsafe to leave them out of consideration in studying the language of any community," notes D. E Marvin (1916: 4). Norrick adds that "[l]ike simplex words and idioms, proverbs are form-meaning units which must be included in any complete language description" (1985:2). However, despite the well-recognised role of proverbs in the pragmatics of communication, their self-conscious deployment of symbolism and rhetorical gestures in everyday speech often gets overlooked. Proverbs actively solicit creative interpretation while denying themselves textual status: they appear to suppress the artfulness in their construction and application, presenting as natural and spontaneous modes of expression. This essay reads a selection of collected proverbs based around the act of speaking and the role of spoken language in social communication as rhetorical moments to illustrate the ways in which a language community may self-reflectively deploy aesthetic utterances to articulate the norms and values that lead to the construction of social identity. In this essay, some Phalee proverbs about language use are analysed to see how metaphor and rhetorical figures in proverbs can make a value-based point in everyday speech in Phalee culture. Some contextual information about the language and culture will be offered to underpin the readings of specific proverbs in translation.

2. Proverbs and Cultural Exchange

"Because all people, regardless of their culture, share common experiences, many of the same proverbs appear throughout the world," write Samovar et al. (2010:29). Therefore, some of the proverbs in this paper may resemble those in other language corpora in meanings, forms or structures. Despite these similarities, like synonyms within a language, synonymic proverbs across languages and cultures cannot, of course, be fully synonymous since the expressiveness in their meanings are varied, and they cannot be used in similar situations (Abdullaeva 2017:87). Some features or characteristics are necessarily culture-specific, and they reflect the way particular people think of and perceive the

world and engage with it through language. The rhetorical devices or the imagery that are used in the Phalee proverbs have unique aesthetic characteristics that are specific to their social and linguistic expression. Thus, the interpretation of some proverbs demands a historical or cultural contextualisation. "No single application of a proverb exhausts its meaning" (Taylor 2017: 10); therefore, some of the proverbs in this essay might have more than one meaning depending on the situation and the various aspects of the speaker's intention and the listener's inference.

As indicated above, it is a truism in paremiology that proverbs reflect the predominant attitudes of a culture much in the same way that speech communicates human thought (Raymond 1954: 57). Since they are brief by design, they are easy to remember and can be used on any occasion, unlike other traditional oral genres. Despite their simplicity and shortness, many proverbs are poetic, highly embellished with literary devices, and convey essential meanings. Because "[p]roverbs are valued as folk wisdom and bearer of traditional lore," it is not far-fetched to claim that the use of a proverb in any spoken discourse or conversation reinforces the traditional values and beliefs amongst the users (Norrick 2015b: 7). Apart from their didactic purposes, proverbs are employed in conversations to impress or persuade the listeners, recapitulate and emphasise the main points in a concise statement, and ridicule aspects of common behaviour, sometimes with added humour, playfulness, and wit. The roles of proverbs are many and they are used as strategies for dealing with a variety of communicative situations. As Arewa and Dundes put it, "[l]ike other forms of folklore, proverbs may serve as impersonal vehicles for personal communication" (1964:70).

Most of the proverbs on speech, talking and lack thereof in Phalee discussed below express a wariness towards the spoken word that is not uncommon in other languages, although the intensity of the valences does differ across cultures. Fisher and Yoshida's (1868) study of Japanese proverbs, for example, shows that they harbour a predominantly negative attitude towards speech. The authors attribute this to the dynamics of densely populated and closely-knit communities in which stringent control over spoken language needs to be exerted to preempt and limit instances of open aggression. On the other hand,

De Caro (1987), conducting a similar examination of attitudes towards speech in American proverbs, found that they express a predominantly positive attitude towards speech. He argues against Fisher and Yoshida's hypothesis, asserting that these attitudes seem more closely linked to cultural norms and ideas rather than demographic factors, at least in the American context.

Closer home, McNeil's (1971) findings regarding the overall attitude towards speech in Indian proverbs portray a more positive outlook compared to the Japanese. The proverbs of Manipuri and Gangte, which McNeil uses in his study, are spoken in Manipur, the Indian state in which Phalee village is located. However, these two cultures and languages are very different from Phalee. Despite the geographical proximity, its distinct culture and language set Phalee apart from the sources McNeil considers, and his insights are rarely applicable to our corpus. Phalee village remains a special kind of microcosm, retaining several traditional modes of existence such as living in close physical proximity with community members (a phenomenon which may possibly be traceable to a historical fear of enemy raids). However, demonstrating this incontrovertibly is outside the scope of this essay since our focus is on offering critical interpretations of the texts rather than establishing causal connections between the texts and ethno-social realities. Suffice it to note that the emphasis on circumspection in speech in Phalee proverbs could stem from this localised density of population, thereby strengthening Fisher and Yoshida's hypothesis.

This guardedness about language use is manifested in the frequent use of verbal indirection to defuse tense, delicate, and threatening situations. Obeng usefully defines this as "a communicative strategy in which interactants abstain from directness in order to obviate crises or in order to communicate 'difficulty' and thus make their utterance consistent with face and politeness" (1994: 42). In another essay, he attempts to demonstrate how proverbs can be used to mitigate the possible threats that lurk within a discourse: "The proverb "softens" the force of the impending face threatening act (FTA), lest it be misconstrued as a verbal assault or an imposition on the advisee" (Obeng,1996: 521). Moreover, not only the listener's but also the speaker's face is threatened by the FTA embedded in the speaker's utter-

ance and, therefore, needs to be mitigated unless the speaker wants to appear openly antagonistic. Norrick adds that proverbial utterances are doubly indirect and often serve euphemistic purposes because they are an act of quoting. They generate implicatures, and consequently, "the speaker can perlocutionarily prevent his hearer from calling him to account for the form or content of his utterances" (2015a: 148). Also, in order to "avoid openly criticising a given authority or cultural pattern, folk take recourse to proverbial expressions which voice personal tensions in a tone of generalised consent. Thus, personal involvement is linked with public opinion" (Raymond 1994: 301). We will now turn to specific examples to show how some of these rhetorical strategies operate in a selection of Phalee proverbs.

3. Phalee in Song

The word 'Phalee' refers to the village, the people, and their language simultaneously. Phalee village, formerly called Phadang, is located within the Indo-Burma Biodiversity Hotspot, 22 km west of Ukhrul district and 86 km from the state capital Imphal, in Manipur, India. Its inhabitants belong to the Tangkhul Naga tribe, and the Phalee language is a distinctive variety of East Central Tangkhul Naga (Glottolog). Phalee-speakers are geographically native to two locations in Manipur: Phalee village in Ukhrul and Thoyee (formerly Thawai) village, approximately 80 km away, in the Kamjong district in Manipur. Local sources attribute this geographical dispersion to a wave of migration from Phalee to Thoyee in 1957 (Phanitphang: 2007). As per the Population Census of 2011, Phalee has a population of 3742 and Thoyee 1159.

Phalee is not protected by a script or orthography and exists as a primarily spoken language. All knowledge of history, culture, beliefs, stories, laws, legends, myths, and customs are orally disseminated, especially in songs. Numerous folk songs consist of only one or two lines. The brevity of the songs makes them easy to remember and incorporate into the conversation. In folktales too, characters often communicate through songs. Folk songs can be considered the primary source of information on Phalee culture, which accords equal status to songs and words. This equivalence is reflected in proverbs as well. For example:

(1) *Tewchi lonei, lochi tewnei*[1]
lit. "Word is song, song is word"[2]
(2) *Khi tewna kup, khilona kup?*[3]
lit. "What word ends; what song ends?"

The first proverb bluntly states the perceived relation between 'word' and 'song' as synonymous in Phalee. The relation between these two terms is made stronger by employing the rhetorical device of chiasmus. The use of alliteration adds musical charm, and the mirror image structure of this proverb also makes it easy to remember and repeat. The balanced parallel structure of the two clauses suggests that the people consider both song and word as equal, and creatively play with consonance in the phrasing. The second proverb also shows how Phalee speakers perceive these two words *lo* 'song' and *tew* 'word' as indistinguishable. The parallel structure of the clauses in this proverb appeals to the listeners' sense of symmetry and harmony, and the alliteration consolidates meaning while adding lyricism to the expression: the proverb itself becomes song. Songs are intricately woven into Phalee social life as every combination of social interaction provides fresh material for recreating it. The conclusion that the rhetorical question denies to word/song and the eternal unending quality it ascribes to them seems literal: in Phalee, songs (and song-like words such as proverbs) are always welcome and enter seamlessly into the conversational continuum. Songs are easier to remember and an efficient way of articulating emotions, ideas, intentions, and meanings. Given the tendency of Phalee

[1] The transliteration of Phalee poses its own challenges. It has only recently started being written down due to the increasing use of electronic texting and community WhatsApp groups among the village diaspora living in Indian urban centres. The orthography is still unstandardised and there is a vibrant discussion within the community regarding transliteration (for e.g. the "tew" in "tewchi" is also written as "teu" by some although there is no consensus yet). As a general rule of thumb, Phalee use the Tangkhul orthography derived from Pettigrew's method since that is the only existing reference. Adopting IPA for general usage would involve a steep learning curve for the lay user and require expert intervention, which is not available at the time of writing. Our transliterations therefore follow the Phalee practice and not IPA standardisation.

[2] Only the texts considered to be proverbs are numbered. See n. 6.

[3] The proverbs that start with *Khi* are unique to Phalee. This structure is not found in the printed collections of Tangkhul proverbs. It may be called a rhetorical proverb since it functions as a rhetorical question.

speakers to constantly lapse into song in everyday conversations, especially among elders (field recordings from the study contain many examples), this rhetorical proverb may be read as also suggesting an awareness of the dynamic nature of both words and songs. It implies that there are as many songs as there are words, and that just as words cannot exhaust (quantitatively or figuratively) a language, so songs cannot be exhausted by the limits of the words they use.

An example of how a particular song can change its social function when the real circumstances of its usage change, and how these semantic shifts are dependent upon not only cultural literacy but also an acknowledgement of the inherent symbolic potential of all aesthetic verbal expression will help to establish this point:

Phalee	**English Translation**
Ungusei kathongshanlo,	Let's go home, call everyone,
Kongpamshu rewkhawonao.	Those who are working near the river.
Rewkachumshu mahonung-rayei.	Chanting can be heard from the ravine.
Kongpamshu rewkhawonaoda hei	Those who are working near the river
Thingkharuina hoikhanurei.[4]	Are ensnared by the roots.

At the literal level, this is a conversation between two groups of people working in different fields. One of the groups, whose field is probably nearer to their village, sends a message to another group of people who are working by the riverside. The song sounds like an everyday conversation, with pleasure and enjoyment, heightened through rhythm and melody, calling friends to go home as usual at the end of the day. The word *mahon*[5] is the

[4] All the proverbs are translated using literal translation method. However, this song is paraphrased.

[5] This refers to the simple *hei ho* exclamation similar to the nautical heave ho sound while doing physical labour. It also refers to the elaborated musical chanting of non-lexical words like *hei, ho, oh, ei*, etc., in singing and dancing. These words are chanted rhythmically in four voices- *rokri, rokro, katenga*, and *khākri*.

rhythmic chanting while working, singing or dancing. However, in a different context, this everyday exchange can sound like an effective warning note that enemies are approaching. The singers would then use the exchange to give an alarm call, couched in innocuous terms while masking their fear and panic by using metaphor as code in the message. In this context, *mahon* would mean the approaching footsteps or the war chants of attackers. Instead of directly saying that they hear the approaching sound of enemies, the singers sing about hearing the chanting of another group of workers from the farther field on their way home. The riverside group's response would then mean being surrounded by enemies. The image of feet entangled by roots exploits the polysemic potential of figurative language and opens it up to interpretation in a context of danger. It metaphorically invokes unwillingness to put an end to a day spent in companionable communal activity but reverts to literalism in a different practical application, while depending upon its functionality as code in nested models of meaning making.

Moreover, according to Phalee oral narratives, any claim or statement is seen as both valid and true as long as there is a folksong to substantiate it. During fieldwork, a nonagenarian quoted proverb (1) during a conversation while discussing a disputed piece of land. He claimed that the particular piece of land belonged to his village. Then he sang a song to substantiate his claim, ending with proverb (1) as a kind of verbal flourish. The song is truth and there is a proverb that says so: the truth cannot be distorted as there is a song that speaks the truth. It is the strong evidentiary value that is accorded to songs in the culture that could enable him to safely say that his claim is the truth and the other's claim is false. As folksongs and proverbs are communal properties, and the Phalee people highly value ancestral words, the other participants in the conversation are compelled to accept his claim, otherwise it will be considered a direct disavowal of the forefathers, showing open disrespect. By citing this proverb, the speaker implies that the listeners should agree with him, or he performs a perlocutionary act so that the listeners should stop arguing.

4. Speaking in the Phalee World: Respect and Care

As a collective society, the people of Phalee (or Tangkhul as a whole) pay great attention to how they communicate in order to maintain communal harmony. Children are taught *chānhān lohān* (speech etiquette or communicative etiquette) at a young age. Containing both *chān-* 'word' and *lo* 'song,' this phrase also echoes (1) and (2). Moreover, speaking politely and eloquently, that is *chānhān lohān khaye* (lit. "having proper communicative comportment") is considered a sign of good breeding.

Elders are expected to be a competent source of knowledge and their words are considered words of wisdom in Phalee, possibly more so than in many other cultures. Since they have lived long on earth, it is argued, they have gained experiences and knowledge to benefit those who are less wealthy in years. A long life is equated with wisdom and understanding:

(3) *Kharartew nniro kaphunghan shairo*
lit. "Listen to elders, eat greens"

This may be spoken to reprimand a child who does not listen to an elder's advice (anybody older than them, not necessarily the ederly). *Kharar* means "old" or "elders." The compound word *kharartew* (*kharar* 'old' + *tew* 'word') 'words of the elders' may be metaphorically understood as ancient wisdom (perhaps a proverb or an old maxim). Such words of elders have withstood the test of time and now have attained the status of cultural truisms. Therefore, it is wise to pay heed to such advice. Here, we see the comparison of greens and the words of the elders and consider both of them as something that will be good for the person who uses them albeit perhaps not always appetising or welcome. Children are taught comportment with proverbs such as:

(4) *Hākpai huipai thikhareda khayoshiro*
lit. "Respect the person who saw the animal's droppings before you did"
(5) *Amik aho somkhareda khayoshiro*
lit. "Respect the person who got eyes and teeth before you"

It is customary etiquette to respect someone older, even if they are senior only by a few months. They must be addressed with

proper honorifics according to family relations and social status. These proverbs can also be cited when someone wants a junior to agree with what they say because they are older and have more experience, so their words must be taken seriously. Using the proverb, the speakers associate their argument with the one already approved by society to persuade the listeners or win them over to their argument. Generally, the speaker who cites proverbs is relatively older than the addressee or someone of the same age but who has (or think they have) an advantage over the other. It is unlikely that a younger person will use a proverb to someone older or who possesses more social power. Children who speak like adults will be chided with the proverbial phrase *nyaonaona rarning kakhu* (lit. "a child speaking like an adult"). It is considered impolite and indicates a lack of proper upbringing.[6]

Speaking softly and respectfully without fail is encouraged. The proverbial phrase *saho thingni nhoika* describes a person's low voice and polite diction. It may be translated as "as polite as withered leaves." The word *nhoi* means both 'wither' and 'meek and mild' in Phalee. The figurative use of the shrivelling of leaves in autumn to connote not only mellowness but also advancing age offers a built-in justification for the proverb's message: age makes both people and leaves soft and mellow. This is a traditional observation about speech that is drawn from nature. By using such familiar imagery, the speaker can describe a person's pleasant and polite speech and its soothing quality while linking it with seniority. But this proverbial phrase can also be used as a barb. The person in question might be speaking gently, but their intention may be otherwise. So, the speakers using this

[6] The distinction we make between proverb and proverbial phrase in Phalee and Tangkhul is based upon an analysis of our corpus and the deployment of such expressions in social interaction as observed and recorded during fieldwork. The definitions upon which the distinction is made are the standard ones in paremiology (Taylor 2017: 184; Norrick 1985: 8; Honeck 1997: 13). The thinking through of such definitions in the Phalee context and providing a rationale for making this distinction comprises a major part of devising the methodology for the larger work from which this essay is drawn. Similarly, since Phalee does not possess a script, lexicon, or written grammar, there is no available typology or terminology (to our knowledge) for anatomising or describing the elements that constitute creative and aesthetic oral expression. Therefore, we have used terms from the Western rhetorical tradition for describing the figures of speech that we identify in the proverbs.

proverbial phrase may indicate a desire to warn the listeners to be cautious with the person's soft talk as their benign and harmless words may conceal malicious intention.

Those who speak harshly with no restraint are also compared with the sting of nettles-*chānhān lohan rānghewna kachew theka* (lit. "speaking like a sting of nettles"). A person whose speech is soft but sarcastic is also described with the proverbial expression *shemnerrui theka* (lit. "like a caterpillar"). The person appears mild and unthreatening, but the words that come out of their mouth sting like a caterpillar. The speaker uses the proverbial phrase as a euphemism to comment on the poisonous nature of the person's speech without stating it directly.

(6) *Khi phuirina nru, khi yangnaona saho rākshi?*
lit. "What python bites, what *yangnao* speaks rudely?"

This proverb talks about the speech etiquette of a dignified individual. *Yangnao* is a hereditary chief of a village, a clan or a subclan, and he is addressed respectfully as *mithara*[7] or *wuthara*. It is expected that *yangnao,* as a respected man in the community, should be humble, polite, and friendly to everyone. These individuals are not supposed to speak rudely but are expected to be compassionate and courteous to everybody. Their dignified and unassuming comportment is compared with that of a python. According to Phalee popular belief, a python is harmless and even heeds what human speech has to say and this confidence in a python's benevolent nature is mapped onto a human being. This proverb is quoted when someone speaks rudely or speaks ill of others who are not their equal in age or social status. The speaker makes the addressee feel like the equivalent of *yangnao*. At the same time, this also acts as a gentle reprimand, suggesting that the action or behaviour under discussion is inappropriate for a dignified person. It is a question which emphasises a point or makes a sarcastic jab. People of different classes exhibit differences in their language use (Macaulay 1976), and Phalee society is no exception. As the number of speakers is very small for Phalee, the variation in accent is not clearly discernible in the

[7] *mi* (elder brother) + *thara* (honorific marker for a noble man) and *wu* (uncle/grandfather) + *thara* (honorific marker for a noble man)

language. Thoyee and Phalee's accent is a little different perhaps due to the influence of the neighbouring villages' dialects, but accent variation does not reveal the socioeconomic status of the speaker. Speaking politely, however, is seen as a sign of good breeding because it shows the humility that a distinguished man should possess. Speaking rudely is seen as undignified, and at the same time, as behaviour that inflicts harm.

(7) *Huina nrushot raka roroiyida miya themachenei*
lit. "Dog throws up and eats it again; man doesn't"

This proverb may or may not be borrowed from the Bible's "As a dog returns to its vomit, so a fool repeats his folly" (*New International Version*, Prov. 26.11). The dog throws up the food because either it ate too much, or the food is poisonous. In the Bible, the person who repeats his or her folly is considered a fool and compared to a dog who does not understand why it throws up the food or is too greedy and foolish to stop eating when hunger is satiated. In the case of Phalee, those who cannot honour their word are seen as a dog. The dog is asserted to have no sense of dignity and cannot realise that eating vomit is abominable, but human beings can discern what is acceptable and what is not. This proverb is cited when someone tries to deny what they had said earlier. This is seen as repulsive behaviour, as abhorrent as the behaviour of the dog that eats its own vomit. But words, once spoken, cannot be retracted. Therefore, it is advised that words should not be spoken without careful consideration because improper verbalisation may lead to severe consequences and may be regretted in the future, the sort of advice the idiomatic English expression "think before you speak" supplies. This proverb can also be cited when the speaker wants to demean the addressee for what is perceived as their repulsive nature. The speaker may intend to humble and criticise the target simply by quoting this without further elaboration. There is safety in this oblique strategy as it shields the speaker from being accused of a direct personal insult.

(8) *Khi miroyungna mpar, khi tewna mpar?*
lit. "What fatwood decays, what word decays"

This rhetorical proverb, similar to (2) and (6) above, compares the spoken word with the fatwood of a pine tree: fatwood was not only used for illumination before the coming of electricity, but it also had other cultural significances. The fresh resin of fatwood is used as a balm to heal wounds, cracked hands, and heels. During the village festival called *Risit* which is celebrated after the completion of paddy transplantation at the end of July, a big fire of fatwood is still burned outside every household as part of the festive rituals. In some traditional houses, the pillars would be made with a pine tree that had a good amount of resin. A pine tree would be marked with an axe to let fatwood form, and after the tree had produced enough fatwood, it would be cut down to make the pillars. Fatwood cannot be destroyed easily by weathering and erosion. Its durability is compared in this proverb with the power of spoken words that have the strength to stick long in people's memories. Therefore, caution in speech is frequently advised because improper verbalisation may lead to severe consequences or put the interactants in awkward positions. This proverb can be cited to reproach a person when they find themselves in a tight spot as a consequence of having spoken without thought.

We were able to record this proverb in action during fieldwork. A couple of women were sitting together in a kitchen, chatting about a young couple who, according to rumour, were deeply in love. The boy's family objected to his choice of bride because his mother had once been insulted (when she was a young girl) by the girl's paternal grandmother because she came from a poor family. Some of the ladies knew about that incident. One of the ladies cited (8) to comment on the situation. The grandmother was long dead, but her cruel words are still remembered. The lady cited this proverb as a sarcastic comment and also reminded everyone of the long shadows cast by unconsidered speech or deliberate insults.

(9) *Na thire natew mathiye*
lit. "Although you die, your words don't die"

The word *natew* lit. 'your word' is ambiguous in the sense that the possessive could mean words spoken *by* someone and the words spoken *about* them (which becomes theirs). As in (8)

above, and in the late grandmother's insults in the anecdote, the primary meaning reflects the ever-lasting effect of one's words. It implies that words travel in time and can serve as a source of inspiration or agony for other people even after the original speaker has died. Another meaning revolves around the understanding that the narratives of someone's good or bad deeds, embarrassing moments, achievements or funny incidents remain alive in people's memory for a long time and they persist even after death. A variant, *Nathire naming mathiye* (lit. "Although you die, your name doesn't die) is also used interchangeably in similar situations. Like several of the texts discussed above, these proverbs have both positive and negative applications and may be used either as a criticism of or a tribute to a person. The personification of words and names (i.e. as entities that could die like humans) shows the special power and value that verbal expression connotes in the culture.

5. The Virtue of Silence

Because words once spoken are impossible to kill, some proverbs clearly show the necessity of verbal continence. There is a danger that the speaker will inadvertently reveal things about herself that she would do better to keep quiet about. The result of speaking often brings undesirable results. Therefore, speaking is seen as generating regret, and several proverbs counsel against it:

(10) *Sona sochonrai thi, mina mitewrai thi*
lit. "Animals are killed by their spoor, men by their words"

In this proverb, the animal's tracks become analogous to speech traces left in memory that orchestrate a person's downfall. A loss of control of the tongue and becoming trapped by one's speech is compared with the image of the hunt. Animals cannot help leaving their spoor behind; eventually, the very feet that enable them to run away also make them vulnerable to hunters. Similarly, what is considered a proper vehicle of self-expression can also bring disaster. This proverb is used to counsel not to speak

recklessly. The alliteration and consonance used in the phrasing again add melody and poignancy to the utterance.

(11) *Kashu miru miphungraida yātkhew*
lit. "One scratches out trouble from the hearth"

The kitchen hearth is the centre of family and communal life, and a place for animated conversations and the sharing of information or gossip. It is the site of communal conviviality. During such warm and cosy discussions, people routinely exchange news about village life and events, including other people's secrets, which is likely to spread further and hurt someone else or boomerang on the gossipmongers themselves. In extreme cases, one could imagine that the referent of the conversation complains against the speaker of slander to the village court. This proverb is cited to warn against oversharing and harmful gossip and exhorts people to keep their own counsel. It is also used to ridicule someone who faces trouble for bad-mouthing somebody.

6. Embodied Affect: Speaking on the Body

(12) *Mida nrek misew koi*
lit. "Talking to people invites hostility"

(13) *Thingda nrek, thing wao; nrungda nrek, nrung kai*
lit. Talk about a tree, the tree breaks; talk about a rock, the rock breaks

This proverb's context lies in the pre-Christian animistic belief system of the community. Holding natural objects like trees, ponds, and rocks to be inhabited by spirits, they made sacrifices to appease them and prevent them from wreaking havoc in the human realm. If someone fell ill or was harmed, they attributed it to spirits dwelling within these natural objects and would speak of the offended (and offending) spirit, believing that this would offend them and make them leave the rocks or trees, to the extent of forcing an exorcism through the destruction of the identified abodes. It is believed that if everyone talks about the enormous size or uniqueness of a big tree or a rock, the tree falls or the rock breaks and is destroyed. We see that spoken words are believed to affect even the natural environment.

The contextual aspect for understanding the meaning of (12) is a superstition that if people talk about somebody too much, especially for doing something socially unacceptable, the person will lose appetite, feel fatigued, and slowly waste away and even die. This phenomenon is called *khamu-kharang karoka* or *misew koka*. It may be due to the psychological impact on the subject, which is tantamount to social ostracisation that such extreme effects are envisaged. These beliefs, and the proverb that encapsulates it, expresses the view that words possess the power to heal and harm, to vilify and exalt. When an individual loses their good reputation, it affects their mental health, and this can lead to physical illness, too. This embodied attitude towards social well-being in which emotions and imagination are seen to affect both physiology and cognition, pervades the norms and values of the Phalee worldview. Interestingly, it is not the *gaze* of the other, as when warding against the evil eye, but the *speech* of the other, that the Phalee consider to be potentially harmful.

Having low vitality, and even yawning, without apparent physical cause is associated with people saying negative things about the sufferer. It is said that in the past people wore mugwort behind their ears when they travelled outside the village to ward off the evil effects of the ill intent and unkind words of strangers. Both (12) and (13) express folk belief about the negative effect of spoken words, but (13) extends this ill intent as affecting the natural world as well. Similarly, in (12), excessive gossip about someone could ruin the person's life. The following proverb also talks about the occult power of words.

(14) *Nchan rirkha mikharing nam*
lit. "If (you) talk about someone, (you) get the person's smell"

In English, "Talk of the devil and he will appear" (Flavell and Flavell 2011: 71) is said when we gossip about someone and then the person suddenly appears nearby. Similarly, the Phalee also use the above proverb when someone unexpectedly shows up while others are discussing or gossiping about them. The literal meaning of *mikharing* is 'person who is alive,' which refers to a person who is long lived. If the person spoken about unexpectedly appears in the flesh, *Na okpirakrarei* (lit. "You'll definitely

live long") is said to avoid any awkwardness and to save face (see FTA above), since talking about someone behind their back is disapproved of in Phalee as it is in English. According to an old belief, a person who shows up while people are talking about them gets a long life. People like hearing compliments and, therefore, although everyone knows that it may not necessarily be true, it makes the person happy even for a brief moment. The above proverb is usually used to caution to speak in hushed tones and not to mention the name of the person spoken about in order to avoid awkwardness and inconveniences in case the person unexpectedly appears within earshot.

This proverb also reflects the zoomorphic tendencies in Phalee proverbs. Human beings take on the attributes of dogs, caterpillars, and other animals. Thinking of a person's essence in terms of their smell possibly reflects the Phalee way of not drawing sharp distinctions between the human/animal/natural worlds but considering all creation as enmeshed and entangled with each other.

(15) *Mi chungkha tewre chung*
lit. "The more the people, the more the words"

An informal, more forceful, and obscene variant is *Mi chungkha paire chung* (lit. "The more the people, the more the shit"). This proverb talks about the difficulty in taking decisions when there are too many people involved, similar to the English "Too many cooks spoil the broth" (Flavell and Flavell 2011: 54). The contextual application of the variants is obviously different, but the sentiment and syntax remain the same. This proverb is also used in situations that require withholding of information. The sense is that although whatever is being spoken about may be small and insignificant, if too many people talk about it, this can snowball into a major issue, or the content can get distorted as in a game of Chinese whispers. The internal rhyme in this formulation keeps the phrasing pithy, succinct, and memorable. The obscene version plays upon the more formal one's use of balanced consonance in a particularly pungent and effective manner.

7. Beyond Silence

(16) *Nhankhangai yenrumo, yeikashe yenruthak*
lit. "Hardly encounter the person (we) want to talk with, frequently encounter the enemy"

This proverb is not specifically about speech, but here we see the strong links Phalee culture has between conversation and sociability. Liking a person is equated with having a desire to talk to or ask after the person. The literal translation of the word *nhānkhangai* is 'have a desire to ask or enquire' and assumes friendly feelings. Interest in others is a mark of attentiveness and indicative of a desire to make connections and forge bonds. In the Phalee dialect, there is no conventional expression of greeting. Instead of general phrases such as "good morning" that demand no real answer and remain mere courtesies, people ask specific questions such as "What are you doing?," "Where are you going?," "Where will you go today?," and "Have you had your meal?," What dish are you cooking?," "What will you have for lunch?," or What did you have for lunch?" and so on, depending on the place and time in which they encounter one another. These questions, which may be regarded as personal and intrusive in other cultures, are a formalised way of showing genuine interest towards the addressee. In Phalee, conversation usually begins with a question.

In the Phalee worldview, talking is crucial for building relationships, and building relationships between people in a community is essential for strengthening cultural identity, fostering social cohesion, and maintaining communal well-being. We avoid people we do not like and do not want to initiate or continue a conversation. In a village, everybody knows each other and speaks with each other. The only people to whom they do not talk are instantly marked out as enemies in signifying with whom the speaker does not feel any level of comfort. This proverb can be cited when a woman recounts her awkward meeting with an ex-lover.

The implication is that while exchanging words is a pleasant activity, the discomfort of being unable to evade an unwelcome encounter is exaggerated as facing the enemy in a subtle comparison. The intensity of the reluctance turns a single encounter into the compounded discomfort of many such.

(17) *Teimukna nchorongrai kapuraka "Maiti riwukthi-torei" chi*
lit. "Quail perches on a fern and says, 'I can see the Imphal valley'"

Those who have no restraint on their speech and speak as though they know more than they actually do are often ridiculed with proverbs. This wellerism is cited when someone shows off their limited knowledge. The vanity itself is a sign of foolishness, but being shown up as ignorant when the limit of the knowledge is exposed is doubly so. The quail is a ground bird and cannot fly high. The little height it can reach (a bendy fern, not even a tall and erect tree) makes it feel as though it can see the whole valley. Literally speaking, Imphal is located several miles away from Phalee, and therefore, there is no chance that a quail in the village environs can ever see the Imphal valley, even if it were to climb the tallest tree, which it cannot do anyway.

At the metaphoric level, of course, the quail is compared to the loquacious boaster who knows very little yet speaks with exaggeration to impress others and pull their weight in every discussion. The hyperbolic comparison adds sarcasm and dismisses the know-it-all as a fool. This is unsurprising since we have already seen that Phalee highly values humility and modesty in social interaction and personal deportment (which are often indistinguishable from each other). It also adds a buffer of humour to the conversation and turns it into banter. To tell someone directly that they are ignorant and vain is likely to rapidly lead to unpleasantness. However, it is also crucial to offer a good-humoured corrective to the undesirable behaviour and show the addressee that boasting actually leads to an effect diametrically opposite to the intended one. This proverb too is deployed in FTAs.

As in other languages, Phalee proverbs are often cited with an introductory formula like *anikhakharar chāncham theka* meaning 'like the ancient proverb' or *awu-ayi chāncham theka* 'like the proverb of our forefathers' to flag the special self-consciously rhetorical place these linguistic objects occupy in everyday speech. (*Anikhakharar*) *the chāncham sasayei* lit. "There was a proverb like that (from the old days)" is also used after quoting a proverb. This expression softens the didactic tone of

the proverbs. It is frequently used as a communicative strategy to reduce FTAs or as the last word in a debate.

The use of the introductory formula also makes the statement more powerful as it signals that the speaker is not responsible or the source of this particular piece of wisdom but is merely rehearsing traditional and commonly held beliefs. In Arora's words, it belongs to the category of "they say" and not "I say" (1984: 8). Through this rhetorical strategy, listeners who share the same cultural background are urged to accept it as a piece of authoritative traditional wisdom (Mieder 2008:161). Moreover, using such an introductory formula helps to speak impersonally and indirectly and, therefore, as shown above, can be used as a verbal strategy to avoid awkwardness and FTAs.

8. Conclusion

The corpus of collected proverbs that have been discussed in this paper unsurprisingly reveals that Phalee culture uses proverbs as an important communication strategy. Indeed, it is the commonality of these formulaic utterances and the very fact that some aphoristic and didactic sayings possess certain formal characteristics that enable us to identify and mark them as proverbs (which is a foreign term in the Phalee context) in the first place. However, the more specific interest of these collected proverbs lies in the implications of the formal and rhetorical strategies that they employ to illustrate an embodied understanding of language and its power that is not very precisely mappable onto how the same theme is engaged with in English. Most proverbs about speaking in Phalee are inclined more toward restraining speech; hardly any proverb encourages speaking, but all are couched in highly-wrought and balanced syllabic constructions that are beautiful to hear. Self-censorship and holding the tongue are construed as a greater virtue, but the proverb forms show how Phalee society also holds the ability to speak well, with the use of aesthetic flourish, in high regard and urges its speakers to pay great attention to what they say and try to reach the standards of verbal skill set by society. As we saw, many proverbs warn to be cautious with words so that speakers may avoid embarrassment and FTAs. It is because Phalee society sets great store by

embellished and lyrical speech that almost all the proverbs in this paper use symbols, metaphors, similes, polysemy, deliberate ambiguity, and figures of speech to magnify the sonic beauty of aesthetic verbal utterance and generate open-ended, layered, and complex networks of signification. The message seems to be that one should rather hold one's tongue than not speak well. The irony (and special interest) lies precisely in the amount of attention that is paid towards the crafting of verbal artefacts to convey exhortations to silence. Phalee proverbs about speech, silence, and human communication, therefore, show how the familiar village environment, quotidian and livelihood practices, and the natural and animal worlds may be gainfully employed by heightened speech to imbue the everyday with an animistic and embodied sense of beauty that moves both speaker and listener to a positive and socially beneficial action.

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