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The Negro in Spanish Proverbial Expressions

HOWARD M. JASON

The second quarter of this century was a period of considerable interest in the study of the Negro in Spanish literature, if we may judge by the number of articles published bearing on this subject.¹ Because the authors of these articles examined Spanish poems, novels and plays exclusively, what we find in their work is a picture of the Negro as seen through the eyes of the poets, novelists and dramatists in whose works he appeared. The purpose of this paper is to broaden somewhat the area of the study of the Negro by looking elsewhere for information. Its purpose is to find out what Spaniards say about him in their proverbs and proverbial expressions. The merit of such an investigation lies in the difference between these expressions and most of the other literary forms. In a play or a novel or a poem we find one person's view of life. We find a synthesis of the wisdom, the knowledge and the experience of one individual, usually, an educated individual. Now, proverbs and proverbial expressions are different. They are part of a nation's folklore. They have been called the storehouse of the wisdom of the common people, and therefore, one can deduce from them what the common people know.² Their distinguishing characteristic is

¹The following articles were published during this period:

- a. John Brooks, "Slavery and the Slave in the Works of Lope de Vega," *Romanic Review*, XIX (1928), pp. 232-243.
- b. Angel Valbuena Prat, "Sobre la poesía de Luis Palés Matos y los temas negros" (1933), prólogo a *Tuntún de pasa y grifería, poemas afroantillanos* de Luis Palés Matos, San Juan, Puerto Rico, 1937.
- c. V. B. Spratlin, "The Negro in Spanish Literature," *Journal of Negro History*, XIX (1934), pp. 60-71.
- d. W. Napoleon Rivers, "Why Negroes Should Study Romance Languages," *Journal of Negro History*, XIX (1934), pp. 118-136.
- e. Carter G. Woodson, "Attitudes of the Iberian Peninsula," *Journal of Negro History*, XX (1935), pp. 190-243.
- f. Ildefonso Pereda Valdes, "Contribución al estudio del tema del negro en la literatura castellana hasta fines de la Edad de Oro," *El Negro rioplatense y otros ensayos*, Montevideo, 1937.
- g. Fernando Ortiz, "El Negro en el teatro español," *Ultra*, IV (1938), pp. 553-555.
- h. Rafael Marquina, "El Negro en el teatro español," *Ultra*, IV (1938), pp. 555-568.
- i. Edmund Villela de Chasca (editor), *Lope de Rueda's Comedia de los engañados*, Chicago, 1941.
- j. Edmund Villela de Chasca, "The Phonology of the Speech of the Negroes in Early Spanish Drama," reprinted from *Hispanic Review*, Vol. XIV, No. 4, October 1946, by the Lancaster Press, Inc., Lancaster, Pa.

²Francisco Rodríguez Marín, *Más de 21,000 refranes castellanos no contenidos en la copiosa colección del Maestro Gonzalo Correas*, Madrid, 1926, "Introducción," p. xviii.

that usually they belong first to the oral tradition of the people before appearing in books.³ According to Julio Cejador, proverbs, proverbial expressions and *villancicos* (carols) are the most fundamental forms of Castilian popular literature; they are the language in action; they are the creation of everybody, and they are as ancient as the language itself.⁴ Sometimes these expressions contain profound truths but not always because there are some which are only historical statements, others are simply apt observations, and still others are mere phrases or even single words. They are, nevertheless, expressions which for one reason or another came into popular use, became the property of the common people, and were handed down from one generation to another. Because these expressions have such a broad base, because we find in them things which not one educated individual but numerous ordinary individuals in many generations considered worthy of being repeated and remembered, these expressions are more national in character and are probably more representative of the true feelings of a nation on a given subject than the works of any individual. It was for reasons such as these that the celebrated Fray Luis de León wrote concerning Spanish proverbs that their merit lay in the fact that just as no one individual is as wealthy as all the people put together, in the same manner, where knowledge is concerned, no individual is as wise nor can hit upon the truth as frequently as many persons working together, if they are not exceedingly coarse.⁵

Although some students of the subject are of the opinion that the Negro reached Spain by way of the Western Hemisphere,⁶ it should not come as a surprise to anyone that there are references to Negroes in Spanish proverbs, many of which were in current use long before 1492, because it was centuries before the discovery of America that Spaniards first came into contact with black people. There is proof of this in the fact that Rafael Altamira y Crévea, one of the most respected of Spanish historians, writing about the Roman colonization of Spain and discussing the social classes, says that the Romans divided the inhabitants into two classes: freemen and slaves. The latter, he says, were either prisoners of war or foreigners sold into slavery. And then he adds in parentheses that these foreigners included Negroes from Africa, who were already being used as slaves.⁷ Since the Roman conquest of Spain began in the year 218 B. C., then the contact of Spaniards with Negroes dates at least from as far back as the second century before the birth of Christ.

³*Ibid.*, p. xix.

⁴*Refranero castellano*, Madrid, 1928, "Introducción," p. viii.

⁵*Refranes o Proverbios en castellano que juntó y glosó el comendador Hernán Núñez*, revistos y enmendados por Fr. Luis de León, 3 volúmenes, Madrid, 1804. "Prólogo," pp. xxii-xxiii.

⁶In his essay on the Negro in Spanish literature, Hldefonso Pereda Valdés wrote: "Was it possible for the theme of the Negro to be known in Spain in the Sixteenth Century unless it was by way of the Western Hemisphere? From Africa to America and from America to Europe: that was the trajectory of the Negro." (Translated)—*El Negro rioplatense*, p. 8.

⁷*Historia de España y de la civilización española*, Barcelona, 1900, Vol. I, p. 117.

Therefore, Spaniards had more than ample time in which to become acquainted with them and to introduce references to them into their proverbs.

We shall consider first the proverbs and proverbial expressions which are of a disparaging nature; we shall present next those in which we find the opposite view inasmuch as they are more favorable to the Negro, and then we shall list those which do not fall in either of these categories but seem to lie between them.

The following are examples of disparaging proverbial expressions. Each one is followed by a translation in parentheses and then by a translation of the comments and explanatory remarks of the authorities indicated.

1. Perro (Dog). Moors and slaves were called dogs because, not being Christians, there was nobody who could save their souls and they died like dogs.⁸

2. Juan Blanco (John White). They call Negroes that, meaning the opposite.⁹

3. Eso es lo mismo que al negro llamar Juan Blanco (That is the same as calling a Negro John White). This expression is used with reference to those who attribute to some person or to some things qualities which are the opposite to those they ordinarily have.¹⁰

4. Mosca en leche (Fly in the milk). Nickname given to what is black.¹¹

5. Boda de negros (Colored folks' wedding). This is said because of the hubbub and the uproar.¹²

6. Como merienda de negros (Like a colored folks' supper). This is said because of the noise and the uproar.¹³

7. Tratáronse como unos negros (They treated each other the way Negroes do). It means that they treated each other badly.¹⁴

8. Con mulos y mulatos, poco trato (Have few dealings with either mules or mulattoes).¹⁵

9. Ni perro, ni negro, ni mozo gallego (Neither a dog, nor a Negro, nor a Galician servant).¹⁶

10. Galgo, hidalgo, negro y judío, siempre están muertos de

⁸Maestro Gonzalo Correas, *Vocabulario de refranes y frases proverbiales y otras fórmulas comunes de la lengua castellana en que van todos los impresos antes y otra gran copia*, Madrid, 1924, p. 629.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 253.

¹⁰José María Sbarbi, *Diccionario de refranes, adagios, proverbios, modismos, locuciones y frases proverbiales de la lengua castellana*, obra póstuma editada por Manuel José García, Madrid, 1922, Vol. II, p. 134.

¹¹Correas, *Vocabulario*, p. 610.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 541.

¹³Julio Cejador y Frauca, *Tesoro de la lengua castellana*, Madrid, 1909, Vol. 3, p. 328.

¹⁴Correas, *Vocabulario*, p. 488.

¹⁵Francisco Rodríguez Marín, *Más de 21,000 refranes*, p. 82.

¹⁶Hernán Núñez, *Refranes*, Vol. 3, p. 21.

frío (Greyhounds, noblemen, Negroes and Jews are always dying of cold).¹⁷

11. En balde acude al jabón el que es negro de nación (He who is a Negro by birth in vain resorts to the use of soap).¹⁸

12. Lavar la cara de un negro es perder agua y tiempo (Washing a Negro's face is a waste of time and of water).¹⁹

13. Eso es como quien lava la cabeza de un negro (That is like washing a Negro's head).²⁰

14. Malos son los negros; pero peor es no tenerlos (Blacks are bad, but not having them is worse).²¹

15. Es cosa perdida, como traer negros en vendimia (It is useless, like employing Negroes to harvest grapes).²²

16. Es nunca acabar, enviar negros a vendimiarse (It is never to finish, to send Negroes to gather grapes).²³

17. ¿Fantasía tiene la negra, con tanta jeta? (Is the Negro woman vain, with those thick lips?)²⁴

18. Fantasía de negro (A Negro's vanity). People say *fantasía de negro* because Negroes are fond of walking about all spruced up, although any trinket will do to satisfy them, and upon being regarded with favor they become very conceited.²⁵

19. Con más dijese que una negra (More gaudily decked out than a Negro woman). It is applied to any person who goes about in all her finery, comparing her with Negro women, who are exceedingly fond of loading themselves down with trinkets and gewgaws.²⁶

20. No hay negra que mal no huela (There isn't a Negro woman that doesn't smell).²⁷

21. Ni aunque estudie en Salamanca, se hace la prieta blanca (Not even by studying at the University of Salamanca can a black woman make herself white).²⁸

22. Prieta que mucho se lava, más prieta tiene la cara (The more a black woman washes her face, the blacker it is).²⁹

¹⁷Francisco Rodríguez Marín, *12,600 refranes más no contenidos en la colección del Maestro Gonzalo Correas ni en Más de 21,000 refranes castellanos*, Madrid, 1930, p. 139.

¹⁸Francisco Rodríguez Marín, *Todavía 10,700 refranes más no registrados por el Maestro Correas ni en mis colecciones tituladas Más de 21,000 refranes, 12,600 refranes más, y Los 6,666 refranes de mi última rebusca*, Madrid, 1941, p. 119.

¹⁹Rodríguez Marín, *12,600 refranes más*, p. 262.

²⁰Sbarbi, *Diccionario*, II, p. 134.

²¹Rodríguez Marín, *Ibid.*, p. 194.

²²Correas, *Vocabulario*, p. 206.

²³*Ibid.*, p. 209.

²⁴Rodríguez Marín, *Más de 21,000 refranes*, p. 204.

²⁵Sebastián de Covarrubias Orozco, *Tesoro de la lengua castellana o española*, según la impresión de 1611. Edición preparada por Martín de Riquer, Barcelona, 1943, p. 584.

²⁶Sbarbi, *Diccionario*, II, p. 134.

²⁷Francisco Rodríguez Marín, *Los 6666 refranes de mi última rebusca*, Madrid, 1934, p. 118.

²⁸Rodríguez Marín, *12,600 refranes más*, p. 218.

²⁹Rodríguez Marín, *Todavía 10,700 refranes*, p. 240.

23. Negra que se quiere hacer blanca, pierde el tiempo, el jabón y el agua (The Negro woman who wants to become white, wastes time, soap and water).³⁰

24. Fué la negra al baño, e tovo que contar un año (The colored woman went to the bathhouse and she talked about it for a year).³¹ This proverb points out that simple people find much to talk about in anything, if it is new to them.³²

Judging by these expressions, the average Spaniard has a low opinion of the Negro. He has belittling nicknames for him; he considers him noisy; and he places Negroes among several things that he does not want. He believes Negroes to be vain, poor workers in certain situations, and so simple that any bauble will do for him to feel well dressed. That some of these opinions were preserved without much reflection is evident from the fact he claims that the Negro has a strong odor, but when he sees him bathing or washing his face he feels that the purpose is to make himself white and, therefore, that it is a waste of time. It is not surprising that the common people of Spain speak this way about Negroes since in their proverbs they speak in a similar manner about practically everyone else. Thus, one can find among their traditional sayings insulting remarks about the English, the French and the Portuguese; about Moors and Jews; about the inhabitants of the various regions of Spain (Galicians, Asturians, Castilians, Andalucians), and so on.³³ What we may consider surprising and out of the ordinary with regard to the Negro is that one can also find the opposite view among these expressions. One can find it in spite of the fact that many of the Africans that the Spaniards saw were slaves who occupied the lowest position in the social scale.

³⁰Rodríguez Marín, *12,600 refranes más*, p. 217.

³¹Íñigo López de Mendoza, *Obras de Don Íñigo López de Mendoza*, edited by José Amador de los Ríos, Madrid, 1852, p. 512.

³²Sbarbi, *Diccionario*, II, p. 134.

³³The following are a few examples:

- a. Todo inglés pariente del Draque es (Every Englishman is a blood relative of (Sir Francis) Drake). — Rodríguez Marín, *Todavía 10,700 refranes*, p. 294.
- b. Más borracho que un francés (More drunk than a Frenchman). — *Algunos refranes, modismos y cantares geográficos empleados en España* por Gabriel María Vergara Martín, Madrid, 1931, p. 20.
- c. Hinchado como un portugués (Puffed up like a Portuguese). — Correas, *Vocabulario*, p. 594.
- d. Al judío datle un palmo, e tomará cuatro (Give the Jew an inch and he'll take four.) — *Obras de Íñigo López de Mendoza*, p. 506.
- e. La golondrina para atravesar las Castillas necesita llevar con ella su provisión de mano (To cross the Castiles, a swallow must carry along its own food). — Gabriel María Vergara Martín, *Carácter y cualidades de los habitantes de las diferentes regiones españolas según sus cantares y frases populares empleados acerca de ellos*, Madrid, 1931, pp. 12-13.
- f. Al andaluz, hazle la cruz; si es sevillano, con la una y otra mano; si es cordobés, con las manos y los pies (Cross yourself when you see an Andalusian; if he is from Seville, do it with each hand; if he is from Córdoba, do it with your hands and also your feet). — *Ibid.*, p. 18.
- g. Hijos de Madrid, uno bueno entre mil (Among the sons of Madrid, one in a thousand is good). — *Ibid.*, p. 21.

Let us consider now the proverbs and proverbial expressions where we find this opposite view. Each of these expressions is followed by a translation in parentheses and then, if available, by a translation of the explanatory remarks of the collector.

1. Aunque somo negro, hombre somo, alma tenemo (Though black, we are men and we have souls).³⁴ One says this to criticize those who scorn to associate with others and to admit them.³⁵

2. Aunque negros, gente somos (Though black, we are people). No one is to be scorned or slighted no matter how humble or low he may be.³⁶

3. Todos somos negros, y no nos entendemos (We are all Negroes, and we cannot hear each other).³⁷

4. Negro de blanco dentón y blanco de neguijón (The Negro with white teeth and the white man with caries). These are the words of a Negro who boasts of having white teeth and points out to the white man that his are bad and have caries. It means that there isn't anyone no matter how downcast he may be that does not have something he can be proud of nor anyone so happy that he does not have something which troubles him, and it means further that even the vilest things have some use and even the best things have some defects.³⁸

5. — Yo no te entiendo, negro. — Ni yo a ti, señor ("I don't understand you, black man." "Nor I you, master.")³⁹

6. Razón tiene el negro de no echar agua con tres asnos (The Negro is right in not pouring water with three donkeys).⁴⁰

7. A oscuras, todo es negro (In the dark, everything is black).⁴¹

8. Negro es el carbonero; pero blanco su dinero (The coal dealer is black, but his money is white).⁴²

9. No son todos negros los que van a la vendimia (Those who go out to gather grapes aren't all Negroes).⁴³

According to these examples, the ordinary Spaniard realized that Negroes were not the only ones who made a lot of noise and, if it was useless to employ them to harvest grapes,⁴⁴ that they were not the only ones since others too went out to gather them. He noticed the excellent quality of Negroes' teeth; he was aware of the fact that some Negroes could have as much difficulty understanding

³⁴Hernán Núñez, *Refranes*, I, p. 146.

³⁵Correas, *Vocabulario*, p. 73.

³⁶Covarrubias, *Tesoro*, p. 826.

³⁷Correas, *Vocabulario*, p. 483. Another saying in this volume goes like this: "Somos griegos, y no nos entendemos" (We are Greeks and cannot hear each other). The author explains it by saying that people say that when there is much noise and uproar. — *Ibid.*, p. 465.

³⁸*Ibid.*, p. 333.

³⁹*Ibid.*, p. 516.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, p. 433.

⁴¹Rodríguez Marín, *Todavía 10,700 refranes más*, p. 32.

⁴²Rodríguez Marín, *Refranes castellanos*, p. 318.

⁴³Correas, *Vocabulario*, p. 363.

⁴⁴See on Page 8, Examples 15 and 16.

their masters as the latter in understanding them, and he also saw that the Negro's color did not show on his money. Lastly, he felt that no matter how humble a person may be, he should not be scorned or slighted.

In addition to the expressions listed so far which tend either to belittle or to defend the Negro, the common people of Spain have among their traditional sayings some in which they use experiences of the Negro or statements attributed to him in order to express general ideas having nothing to do with the Negro *per se*. Then there are others in which they make observations about the Negro which because of their objective nature do not fall in either of the previous categories. The following popular sayings belong in this class:

1. El pade nego, la made nega, y la niña banca, aquí hay tlampa (The father black, the mother black, and the child light, something queer is going on here). This is what a Negro said at the sight of the child borne by his wife.⁴⁵

2. Sacar lo que el negro del sermón (To derive what the Negro got out of the sermon). It means not to derive any benefit from the thing that was undertaken; it means to have wasted time. The allusion is, no doubt, to the experience of some Negro recently brought over from Africa who went to hear a sermon and came but feeling disgusted, not having understood a single word. For that reason people sometimes add the phrase, "A hot head and cold feet."⁴⁶

3. ¡Mira qué vergüenza, llevar cabalgando! (What an embarrassing situation: me riding horseback!) These are the words of a Negro who was being taken out to be lashed.⁴⁷

4. — Esa mi pasa, esa mi higo, esa mi pan branquillo. ("Those are my raisins; those are my figs; that is my white bread!") A Negro woman was ill and feeling low when her lover asked her, "Do you want raisins?" "No," she said. "Do you want figs?" "No." "Do you want white bread?" "No." "Well, then, have me!" he said. To which she replied, "Those are my raisins; those are my figs; that is my white bread!" The phrase is suited for pointing out what one prefers over what one doesn't want.⁴⁸

5. Cativo no poder más (A captive can do no more). Negroes and slaves say this to apologize for not being able to do more or for not assisting their acquaintances.⁴⁹

6. Azota, que tu carne azotas (Whip on, you are beating your own flesh). This is the remark of a Negro whom his master was whipping in Toledo, Spain.⁵⁰

⁴⁵Rodríguez Marín, *Más de 21,000 refranes*, p. 166.

⁴⁶Sbarbi, *Diccionario*, II, p. 135.

⁴⁷Rodríguez Marín, *Más de 21,000 refranes*, p. 308.

⁴⁸Correas, *Vocabulario*, p. 204.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, p. 111.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, p. 76.

7. — ¿Por que no quiere el negrito pan? — Porque non dan. (“Why doesn’t the little black boy want bread?” “Because they don’t give it to him.”)⁵¹

8. Alquile una blanca de negros (Go and hire yourself a penny’s worth of Negroes). A remark addressed to bossy people.⁵²

9. Trabajar como un negro o como negros (To work like a Negro or like Negroes). It means to work arduously without rest, like Negro slaves.⁵³

10. Tratóle como a un negro, como zapato viejo (He treated him as he would a Negro, as he would an old shoe).⁵⁴

11. Antruejo, buen santo; pascua, no tanto (Carnival is a good saint; Easter isn’t so good). This is a Negro saying and has to do with the amount of food to eat.⁵⁵

12. Cuando el negro encanece, ya tiene más de siete dieces (When a Negro’s hair turns gray, he is already over seventy).⁵⁶

13. Negro de cien años, aún no está cano (A Negro one hundred years old isn’t gray haired at all).⁵⁷

14. Ya la negra es vuestra (Now the black woman is yours).⁵⁸

15. Como a la negra el afeite (Like make-up on a colored woman). Lope de Rueda, the foremost early Spanish dramatist, uses this phrase when he says, “I believe indeed that they will look well on you, like make-up on a colored woman.”⁵⁹

16. A moro negro, capil, o capirote, o capuchón colorado (For a black Moor, a red hood). It indicates in a jocular sort of way that red looks well on dark persons.⁶⁰

17. Yo me era negra y vistiéronme de verde (I was black and they dressed me in green). It scolds those who, endeavoring to make things better, make them worse by going about it improperly or who make something more noticeable while trying to conceal it.⁶¹ The common belief is that green does not enhance beauty, especially in dark skinned individuals.⁶²

18. Callar como negra en baño (Keeping quiet, like a Negro woman in a bathhouse).⁶³ This is said about the person who dissembles and remains quiet, not replying to words that might offend. It was born from the fact that, in the warm regions where there are public baths, these baths are dark and don’t have any light. If a Negro woman enters the ladies’ bathhouse, she does not answer

⁵¹Rodríguez Marín, *12,600 refranes más*, p. 259.

⁵²Correas, *Vocabulario*, p. 37.

⁵³Sbarbi, *Diccionario*, II, p. 135.

⁵⁴Cejador, *Tesoro*, Vol. 3, p. 331.

⁵⁵Sbarbi, *Diccionario*, II, p. 134.

⁵⁶Rodríguez Marín, *Refranes castellanos*, p. 90.

⁵⁷Rodríguez Marín, *Los 6666 refranes*, p. 113.

⁵⁸Rodríguez Marín, *12,600 refranes más*, p. 337.

⁵⁹Quoted by Julio Cejador in *Tesoro*, Vol. 3, p. 328.

⁶⁰Correas, *Vocabulario*, p. 60.

⁶¹Sbarbi, *Diccionario*, II, p. 134.

⁶²Correas, *Vocabulario*, p. 515.

⁶³*Obras de Íñigo López de Mendoza*, p. 509.

when other women speak to her or ask her a question. She remains quiet lest they push her out ignominiously on finding out who she is, or lest they make fun of her or insult her with such a remark as "Why does the Negro woman go to the bathhouse, if she cannot become white?"⁶⁴

Judging from evidence in these various types of proverbs and proverbial expressions, the following general observations are in order:

1. With regard to the language spoken by the Negroes, it is clear that the Spanish spoken by some of them was very poor, that others spoke the language fairly well and that still others spoke it perfectly. This is natural, for among the Negroes carried to the Iberian Peninsula there were men, women and children,⁶⁵ and it is proper to assume that the children learned to speak Spanish more correctly than the men or the women.

2. The tendency among some individuals to be critical of the Negro as a racial group does not date from the introduction of Negro slavery into the Americas because there are proverbial expressions which predate that event in which such a tendency appears. We find it in such a saying as "The colored woman went to the bathhouse and talked about it for a year"⁶⁶ and in the reasons for the existence of such an expression as "Keeping quiet, like a Negro woman in a bathhouse."⁶⁷ These two are found among the popular sayings collected by Íñigo López de Mendoza, Marqués de Santillana, whose dates are 1398-1458.⁶⁸ These sayings, therefore, had become traditional long before the first slaves reached the Western Hemisphere.

3. The fact that many of these expressions have to do with personal hygiene, that is, with bathing and the cleansing of the body, suggests that the public bathhouse was one of the places where the ordinary Spaniard came frequently into contact with Negroes.

4. In one of the sayings listed there is a reference to the Negro's lips, two others point out that he becomes gray haired very late in life, according to others he is noisy, vain and a poor worker on occasion. It is interesting to note that nothing is said as to the texture of his hair, as to the shape of his nose, as to his dancing or his singing. Since these expressions are silent with regard to these matters, it appears that the Negroes taken to Spain belonged to racial strains which did not stand out in these respects.

5. It is evident from the sayings examined that some Spaniards were prejudiced, but it is also evident that others were not and that these did not hesitate to say so.

⁶⁴Covarrubias, *Tesoro*, p. 191.

⁶⁵Eannes de Azurara, *Chronica do descobrimento e conquista de Guine*, Paris, 1841, pp. 132-135.

⁶⁶See Page 9, No. 24.

⁶⁷See Page 12, No. 18.

⁶⁸Ángel Valbuena Prat, *Historia de la literatura española*, Segunda edición, Barcelona, 1946, Vol. I, p. 256.