

1. INTRODUCTION

In general, most proverbs can be regarded as ‘rules of the game’ of human life. Proverbs preserve and crystallize ancient practical wisdom about a good life. The purpose of this study is to analyse a collection of Meru proverbs in order to understand and to describe the ideal of the good life as presented by these proverbs.

In other words, this study tries to answer the following questions: What is the ideal of a good life like in the light of Meru proverbs? What dimensions and elements does this ideal consist of? What are the pre-requisites for and the obstacles to a good life according to Meru proverbs?

The Meru and their proverb tradition

The Meru of Tanzania are an agricultural Bantu group whose main areas of inhabitation are the eastern and southern slopes of Mt. Meru (*Fig. 1*) near Arusha in the northern part of the country (see the maps on pp. xii–xiii). The Meru of Tanzania are not related to the Meru of Kenya. Instead, they have a close relationship with some of the Chaga groups who live as their neighbours in the Kilimanjaro area.

Already in the 19th century, H. H. Johnston (1886: 118) noted the similarity of the Meru and the Chaga languages. Subsequent linguists such as C. M. Doke (1967: 48; see also Cole 1969) and D. Nurse (1979) have corroborated this linguistic similarity. The latter describes the Meru language as ‘a Chaga dialect closely related to those of W. Kilimanjaro’ (Nurse 1979: 31).

As the linguistic observations indicate, the Meru are historically and culturally also closely related to the Chaga (Dundas 1924: 50; Stahl 1964: 54–94). When B. Gutmann some 70 years ago (1929: 10) outlined the

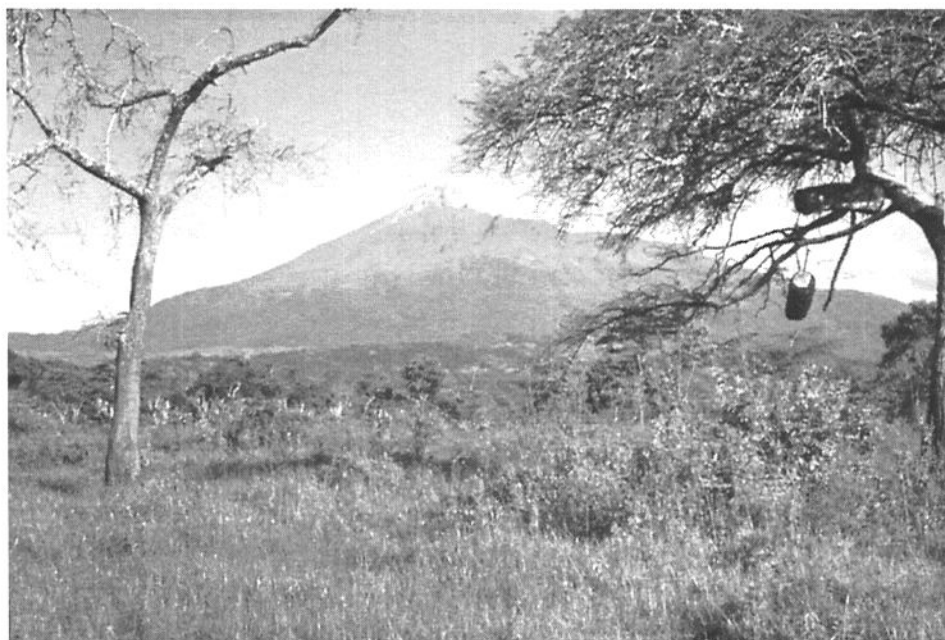


Fig. 1. Mt. Meru (4700 m.) seen from the south.

'Chaga culture zone' (*Kulturzone der Dschagga*) he spoke of the Meru as Chaga people who live on Mt. Meru. Later on, clearly at least from the 1960s, the Meru have been commonly identified as a people ('tribe') of their own.

Many details in the history of the Meru migrations to their present areas are still unknown. According to a Meru tradition, at least some migrations came from Usambara via West Kilimanjaro (Cory, n.d.: 1; Kaaya 1971: 1–2; Nurse 1979: 34; Puritt 1966: 1). This tradition, however, lacks historical and linguistic evidence as T. Spear (1997: 19–21) has recently pointed out.

In the 1970s the Meru already numbered over 100,000 (Spear 1997: 128). At present, the population is somewhere around 200,000 with a majority of Christians, mainly Lutherans. The number of Muslims is small. The rest of the population mainly practice the traditional ethnic religion.

In general, the religious situation among the Meru is not relevant to the topic of this study. There are no signs of any Christian or Islamic influences upon the proverbs analysed in this study, but the proverbs seem to be common Meru property. In this respect, only a few proverbs related to God will need a special discussion (see Chapter 10).

The Meru have a rich oral tradition of myths, entertaining stories, tales, riddles, and so on. In their oral tradition proverbs are a genre of their own, frequently used by people in their everyday social life. Even if there are active bearers of the proverb tradition who are recognised as proverb specialists, common people also love to use proverbs. This has been a frequent observation during my living in the Meru area from 1966–1974 and my subsequent visits to Tanzania.

A proverb has a designation of its own in the Meru language: It is called *sumu*. This designation distinguishes a proverb from other genres of the Meru oral tradition that have been identified and described in my previous studies (Harjula 1969: 16–20; 1989). In genre analysis, proverbs belong to the ‘fixed-phrase genres because their wordings are as fixed as their contents’ (Arewa 1970: 436).

A Meru *sumu*, too, is a short saying with a fixed form and a fixed content. Nevertheless, these qualities or criteria alone do not make proverbs a special genre of their own. It is the function of proverbs (p. 9) that distinguishes them from riddles, oaths, blessings, curses and other short sayings with a fixed form and content.

The collection and analysis of Meru proverbs

Nearly all of the Meru proverbs analysed in this study were collected as a side-project during my ethnomedicinal fieldwork from August 1973 through April 1974. Only a few proverbs related to God were recorded already in my first Meru study (Harjula 1969). As the aforementioned fieldwork with its methods has already been described in detail (Harjula

Introduction

1982), a few specified comments on the collection of proverbs should be enough for the purposes of this study.

The source persons or informants were Mr. Ezekiel Leema (then 86 years old), Mr. Manase Ngeteu (83 years), Mr. Simion Nderingo (47 years) and Mr. Manase Indiaeli (35 years) from the Songoro and Nkoaranga areas (see the map on p. xiii). These persons were chosen because they were recommended by other people as proverb specialists and were also willing to cooperate.

The informants were interviewed several times by one of my students at the Lutheran Theological College Makumira, Usa River near Arusha, Mr. John K. Mbise who had assisted me during my first Meru study. I was personally present and participated on several occasions where the informants presented and explained the proverbs. The informants were also interviewed a few times all together, and in such a situation they obviously inspired each other. During my eight years in Tanzania and my subsequent visits there, I have heard many of the proverbs in natural use and context.

The proverbs were originally transcribed by Mr. Mbise who also translated them into Swahili immediately after their collection. The translations as well as the Meru orthography have been re-checked with minor changes by Rev. Abdiel T. Ndosi, Usa River, in 1996–1997. The English translations are mine. The Swahili translations are given in order to honour and encourage the national research of oral tradition in Tanzania.

In this study of Meru proverbs, special attention is given to the meaning of the proverbs. Lauri Honko (1986a & 1986b) has analysed the discussion on 'meaning' in folklore. His analysis shows that 'meaning' in folklore and folkloristics is a complicated matter with many dimensions and aspects. It would be interesting to take part in the debate on 'meaning' in the light of Meru folklore. This kind of a theoretical reflection, however, falls outside the scope of this study. The Meru material presented in this study would also be too narrow for that purpose. This is why I shall

later on give an operational definition of 'meaning' for the purposes of this study only.

During my first Meru study, I used to ask the informants: What is the meaning of this? What does this mean? When the proverbs were being collected it very soon became obvious that these questions led to other relevant questions: In what kind of a situation is a proverb used? Why is it employed in that context? What does the proverb aim at? In this way, through experience at the grass-roots level, I became convinced that the real meaning of a proverb can be grasped only if all the contextual elements and the function of the proverb are known.

This observation is corroborated by some collections of African proverbs that only include the proverbs themselves, the texts simply arranged in alphabetical order according to the first letter of the first word of the proverbs (for example, Kalugila 1977), or without any particular order at all (Sankan, n.d.). In these collections, the meanings of proverbs often remain unclear. On the other hand, in studies that provide information about the contextual elements and the functions of proverbs the meanings also are grasped by a reader (Abudu 1974; Johanssen & Döring 1915; Ndalu & King'ei 1996, and partly Kuusi 1970).

So far I have spoken of the 'meaning' of proverbs in the broad sense of the word only. Before giving a more specific and an operational definition of the 'meaning' for the purposes of this study, the 'contextual elements' and the 'functions' of proverbs have first to be discussed.

The contextual elements of proverbs

Many proverbs express common human wisdom and can be understood across cultural boundaries without knowing their contextual elements and functions. For example, the understanding of the following Meru proverbs would probably not present any difficulties to an American or a Thai or a Finn:

Introduction

The medicine of a loan is to repay it. (P 60 = proverb no. 60)

A cockroach on a tray does not know the one on the wall. (P 51)

If a tree is too much for a baboon, how could you climb it? (P 81)

The only son does not go to the war. (P 63)

Often, however, one needs to know the contextual elements and the functions of proverbs in order to understand their meanings. Otherwise, the determination of the meanings soon becomes mere guesswork, as it would in connection with the following Meru proverbs:

Are you like the hyena who pulled a cow out of a pool? (P 12)

When an arrow is shot the eye is covered. (P 62)

A rope that lies outdoors does not lack something to bind. (P 111)

Are you like an old sunbird mother who has not grown up? (P 114)

These examples show that without information about the contextual elements and functions of proverbs their meanings also remain unclear. The examples indicate also that there are many different 'contextual elements' or 'contexts' that should be taken into consideration in analysing the Meru proverbs.

The environmental context of the Meru

In a way, the broadest context where the Meru proverbs are used is the physical environment or the milieu where the Meru live. Proverbial metaphors are often taken from the phenomena and objects of the physical environment. This is why a knowledge of and observations about the environmental context of proverbs is vitally important to the understanding of their meanings.

One should have some knowledge of the fauna in the Meru area and have observed the habits of animals, birds and insects (Harjula 1994). Similarly, one has to know something about the flora (for example, certain trees: P 21), the climate and the weather conditions (P 20). Even small

Introduction

observations about the details of the landscape may prove helpful in determining the meaning of a proverb.

The socio-cultural context

Any oral tradition functions within a certain socio-cultural context. The Meru proverbs are used within the total social and cultural reality of the Meru. The proverbs manifest, reflect and present different aspects of this reality. Without adequate knowledge of Meru values, patterns, social structures and many details of Meru everyday life the meanings of their proverbs can hardly be grasped.

One important dimension of any socio-cultural reality is the world-view. The world-view of a people consists of elements like ideas of the place of humans in the universe, concepts of an individual and the society, cosmological ideas, understanding of life and death, and concepts of time and history. Knowledge of a detail in the Meru world-view may occasionally be the only key to a proper understanding of a proverb (P 97).

The context of oral tradition

In Meru society, proverbs are a living genre of their oral tradition. Socio-cultural ideas, values and patterns manifested in proverbs are reflected in other genres as well. For example, prayers and the descriptive names of God can be regarded as particular genres in the Meru oral tradition (Harjula 1969: 17–20). Knowledge of these genres is vital when one analyses and interprets proverbs that speak of God and His activity (Chapter 10). Usually, a name (P 58) or a motif (P 12) appearing in a proverb also becomes meaningful only in the light of information from other genres.

The context of situation and use

Some genres of the Meru oral tradition are used on special occasions only. For example, riddles belong to leisure time and riddle contests are a favourite amusement in the evenings. Different greetings belong to different

Introduction

situations and times of a day. The situations where a curse may be used are strictly defined (Harjula 1969: 41–43).

For the use of Meru proverbs as such, there are no fixed times or occasions. Proverbs can be used any time and anywhere, and are so used. Their *Sitz im Leben* ('place in life') is the everyday Meru life with its variety: Changing situations and events, a gallery of different persons; being born and growing older and dying; human joys and sorrows, hopes and despair; satisfaction and envy, love and hatred, trust and fear.

In everyday Meru life, every proverb belongs to a particular situation or situations where it is applied. This context of situation means the concrete 'life situation' of a proverb where the proverbial text becomes 'alive' and is actually used. It is this context of performance where the 'lore' and the 'folk' are integrated within a particular social situation and become 'folklore' – to use a conception of modern American folkloristics (Abrahams 1971; Bauman 1971a & 1971b; Ben-Amos 1971). In this concrete context of a situation, a folklore text like a proverb gets also its actual meaning.

In the following analysis of Meru proverbs, the term 'context' (of a proverb) especially refers to the context of a situation where a proverb is used and applied. This context is given in connection with every proverb because, as F. W. Golka (1993: 15) emphasizes, 'A proverb has to be explained *primarily* from its life situation'. Nevertheless, the contexts of proverbs described in this study are to be taken as examples only, as illustrations of common life situations where the proverbs are actually used.

The function of a proverb

In addition to the context(s) of a proverb, its function also should usually be known before one can give an adequate explanation of the proverb. Generally speaking, the Meru proverbs have many functions in common. They maintain and strengthen traditional values and patterns. They transmit these values and patterns as well as other traditional ideas and concepts from generation to generation. The proverbs crystallize the practical wisdom of the past generations. In everyday life, the proverbs focus the attention of people on the essentials of common living and offer solutions to human problems. In short, the proverbs present the Meru ideals of the good life in many ways.

In a more specific sense, the function of a proverb is closely related to the situation where the proverb is applied. A proverb does not function in a vacuum but always in a concrete life situation. The context of situation would seem to determine the function. In different situations different proverbs are needed and used.

In this study, the 'function' of a proverb means the purpose of the proverb in a concrete life situation. The proverb functions as a verbal means towards a hoped for result. As an important and often used element of the Meru oral tradition, the Meru proverbs represent a part of their 'arsenal of rhetorical strategies' (Lieber 1984: 438) and often even a 'ready tool for rhetoric in situations of tension' (Yankah 1986: 280).

Most proverbs analysed in this study have didactic, corrective or other similar functions. As the proverbs are used as didactic or other kinds of means towards hoped for results, the functions of the proverbs are best described by verbs like 'to warn', 'to encourage', 'to remind', and so on. This short description of the functions is given in connection with every proverb, as it helps to understand their meaning which is the main concern of the analysis of the proverbial texts in this study.

The meaning of a proverb

What has been said about the contextual elements and the function of a proverb indicates that the ‘meaning’ of a proverb is something more than just a statement, ‘This proverb means this and that’. The meaning of a proverb also includes the function of the proverb in a concrete situation in the sense that the meaning can be ‘read out’ of the text, function and context of a proverb. The ‘meaning’ that opens up from these three elements can be described as the ‘total message’ of a proverb.

In other words, the ‘meaning’ of a proverb is its total message in a concrete situation where the proverb is actually used. This would seem to be an adequate operational definition of ‘meaning’ for the purposes of this study, as this is not a theoretical folkloristic study of proverbs in general. The definition affects the approach to the proverbial texts.

Naturally, the metaphors and other textual elements of proverbs often require explanations. But instead of trying to formulate an explicit meaning for every proverb, I shall concentrate on describing their contexts of use and functions in such a way that it should be possible for the reader to get the message of each proverb. The Meru ideal of the good life will then be constructed from the messages of the proverbs.

Meru orthography and pronunciation

In this study, the orthography of the original proverbial texts from 1973–1974 (as they were written down during the interviews) has been followed with two exceptions: The suffix -Ñ of the original texts is written in this study -NY, and the older uvular nasal Ñ has been replaced by NG’. Here I have followed an obvious trend in Meru orthography, brought about by the influence of Swahili, the lingua franca and the first official language of Tanzania. The trend is demonstrated in the following by some examples:

Introduction

<i>Kirwa-Fibel 1931</i> (An ABC-Book in Meru)	-Ñ	Ñ
<i>Kitabu kya Mma Shiya 1964</i> (The New Testament)	-Ñ	Ñ
<i>Kitabu kya Fiimbo 1971</i> (A Christian Hymnal)	-NY	NG'
This study	-NY	NG'

The suffix -NY at the end of a noun indicates a locative form. At the end of a verb, -NY stands for the 2nd person plural imperative. In Meru pronunciation, -NY comes between *nj* and *ni*, closer to the latter than the former. For example, in the Meru words *nreminy* (in the field) and *kwendieny!* (go!) -NY is pronounced like -NI in the equivalent Swahili expressions *shambani* and *enendeni!*

In Meru speech, the uvular nasal NG' (*ng'ishe*, 'cockroach') is pronounced like the same nasal in Swahili (*ng'ombe*, 'cow') or in the English words *song* and *sing*. Without the apostrophe, NG is pronounced like in Swahili (*unga ngano*, 'wheat flour') or in the English word *bungalow*.

A soft R (alveolar flap) is indicated as ʀ (*Iruva*, 'God'; *Aṛarunya*, a person's name).

* * *

These introductory remarks about the Meru proverbs and their analysis should be enough for the purposes of this study. The following chapter on *Collectivistic Dimensions of the Good Life* will offer an introduction to the subject itself. Basically, the Meru ideal of the good life means living comfortably together. The secrets of the good life open up from the proverbs. In the good life, proverbs are signposts to or rules of the well-being of both the community and an individual.

