

2. COLLECTIVISTIC DIMENSIONS OF THE GOOD LIFE

To the Meru, the good life basically means living together. The Meru concept of a human or a person (*nndu*) is strongly relational. A person gets his or her identity and a meaningful existence as a member of the community, in relationship to other people only (Harjula 1995: 146–148). Collectivistic dimensions are always present in the good life, and the proverbs about the good life become rules of living together.

In principle, it would have been possible to analyse most of the proverbs in this study under the heading of this chapter. Nevertheless, there are certain aspects of the communal good life so important that they are worthy of a chapter of their own. This chapter thus deals with some general observations on the collectivistic dimensions of the good life only, and as such it is an introduction to the substance of the rest of the study.

The following two proverbs give a preliminary insight into the Meru ideal of living together characterized by solidarity, social harmony and transparency.

❖ 1 ❖

Vanika nturu na ngalo!

Tundika mizinga mlimani na bondeni!

Hang up the beehives on the mountain and in the plain!

In the proverb, the verb *ivanika* means ‘to hang up’ beehives that are commonly used by the Meru in order to collect honey. The traditional Meru beehive is a hollowed piece of a tree trunk hung in a tree (*Fig. 2.*). It is wise to hang up the beehives in different surroundings because in this way you can get honey throughout the year.



Fig. 2. Meru beehives (P 1). When honey is collected from the beehives a smoky fire is lit under the tree to drive the bees away.

The proverb is applied, for example, to a person who receives a lot of visitors coming to comfort him or her after a death in the family or another calamity. In such a situation, the proverb functions as an explanation for the great number of visitors. More generally, the proverb reminds people that it is important to have friends 'on the mountain and in the plain'. If you get in trouble, there is always someone to help you. The proverb implies the Meru idea of the common life as living surrounded by and among other people.

❖ 2 ❖

Iriso limwi liworie ipara ndi.

Jicho moja si vigumu kulipasua.

It is not difficult to put out a single eye.

In the proverb, the 'single eye' is a metaphor for a person who lives alone or in a lonely place separated from other people. The proverb functions as a warning to such a person because he or she may easily be harmed by thieves or other crooked people. More generally, this proverb also implies the idea of the common life as living close together.

Living together and solidarity

When living close together, mutual help and solidarity are important values and elements of the common good life. The significance of these values is emphasized by a number of Meru proverbs.

❖ 3 ❖

Kwalolia uroyo arie mwana na kyivari ntare!

Ukiona mwenzako anambeba mtoto kwa ubavu umsaidie!

If you see your friend carrying a child on her side, help her!

A Meru woman or girl usually carries a baby on her back, bound there in a piece of cloth. This leaves both her arms free for other things like collecting firewood or cooking. If the baby cries or otherwise needs attention, he or she is carried on the woman's side. This leaves only one arm free and working is difficult.

The proverb is applied in a situation where a person obviously needs help. The proverb functions as an exhortation to a member of the family, to a friend or a neighbour who would be able to give the needed help. More generally, the proverb reminds people that helping and caring for each other belong to living together as important elements of the good life.

❖ 4 ❖

Shofu yavaria kilwa kyikanumbua: Kor do doo! Kyinini mmuu!

Tembo alimkanyaga chura aliyelia: Kor do doo! Kikubwa ni uhai!

An elephant trampled a frog who shouted: Kor do doo!

How great is life!

The exclamation *Kor do doo!* refers to the usual noise of frogs. In the proverb, life is 'great' in the sense that it is important. The proverb functions as an encouragement to a person in a difficult situation. The person should express the reasons for his or her distress to other people so that they would know how to help. More generally, the proverb reminds people that as members of the community they have the right not only to expect but also to request help from other people.

❖ 5 ❖

Kwerea iwe kwakabwa a niny naramba dudu?

Umeogopa wewe uliyepigwa, na mimi niliyeshuhudia, je?

You were beaten and afraid; what about me who saw it happen?

The proverb is used in a situation where a person has been beaten and robbed. With the proverb an eye-witness expresses his or her sympathies with the victim. The proverb functions as a means of sympathy in other calamities and crises of human life also. The proverb gives expression of solidarity: What happens to you concerns me also.

❖ 6 ❖

Nremi wa mbaai aatoriaa wa kari.

Mkulima wa pembeni humwachia wa kati.

A peasant whose fields are near the forest passes on to one who cultivates in the centre.

If baboons or wild pigs (*Fig. 3*) start eating the harvest in an outlying place, they soon enter the maize-fields in the centre of the village also. This is why everybody is concerned and ready to chase the animals away. The proverb is applied in a situation where someone's cattle have been stolen, or a person or a family has some other problems. The proverb reminds the neighbours that next time it may be their turn. It is no good to laugh at other people's calamities but rather help them, because one day you will need their help in return.



Fig. 3. The Giant Forest-Hog is a forest dweller but comes into the open to raid farms (P 6).

Solidarity and social harmony

The idea of mutual help and solidarity as elements of the good life arouses questions about the nature of solidarity. What does ideal solidarity mean to the Meru in their everyday life? Are there any limitations on solidarity in practice and if there are, what are the acceptable criteria of choice? Or does solidarity mean equality of people?

❖ 7 ❖

Kuteerre wa mungo na wa kyiwari ndi!

Usiwe na wa mgongoni na wa ubavuni!

**Don't have some people behind your back
and some at your side!**

The proverb is applied to a person who treats people in an unequal way. If, for example, a father or a mother favours one of the children, the relatives or neighbours use this proverb in order to advise him or her not to do this. The proverb may seem to suggest that equality of people would be one element of the common good life. Nevertheless, the proverb applies to certain concrete situations only and does not manifest a general principle of the equality of all people. This becomes obvious in the light of other Meru proverbs.

❖ 8 ❖

Wa nndu ungi akuangua usao kake akuangua ufyaa ndi.

Asiye wa jamaa yako hukupangusia damu, lakini hakupangusii usaha.

**One who is not your kinfolk wipes off the blood
from your sore but not the pus.**

❖ 9 ❖

Ikee numba ilya iwaa shoka numba i ndi.

Iliyoko kwenye nyumba ile haiwezi kumwua nyoka katika nyumba hii.

**The snake in this house cannot be killed by the stick
in the next house.**

The proverbs are applied to a person who needs help in a difficult situation, but has not yet decided to whom he or she should turn. The proverbs remind and advise such a person that one's own relatives are obliged to help him or her more than other people are. The proverbs take the ties of kinship with their practical consequences as a natural fact of life. As far as solidarity and mutual help are concerned, relatives are more important than other people.

❖ 10 ❖

Mangi ikaya imuroo ndi.

Mfalme akichomeka haungui.

If a king is set on fire he does not burn to ashes.

In the proverb, the 'king' (*mangi*) is a metaphor for a prosperous and influential person. The proverb is applied in a situation where such a person has suffered misfortune, for example, when some of his cattle have become ill and died or he has lost a part of the harvest. Because of his or her wealth and other resources, it is easier for such a person to recover after a calamity than it is for the poor. The rich usually have more friends than the poor have, ready to show solidarity with them and help them. The proverb simply states a fact of life, but in a concrete situation it often has a bitter taste when used, for example, in reference to a prosperous neighbour.

❖ 11 ❖

Yeva liyayyaa sungo ndi.

Bega haliwezi kuwa refu kuliko shingo.

A shoulder cannot be higher than a neck.

The proverb is applied to a person who thinks too much of himself or herself. The proverb functions as advice or a warning to think of himself or herself modestly in relation to other people. For example, a child cannot be more experienced than his or her parents. More generally, the proverb states an important principle of living together in the Meru community: Everybody has his or her own place and status in the community and common life. There are powerful and influential people, but there are also ordinary people.

In the light of Meru proverbs, social harmony of different people rather than equality of people becomes the ideal of living together and a prerequisite for the good life. Many proverbs indirectly emphasize the significance of social harmony by warning about factors that endanger this harmony.

Dangers to social harmony

In living close together, there are many dangers to social harmony, such as envy and destructive use of words, which will be discussed in detail later on in this study. One of the basic dangers needing special attention here is hidden selfishness, pretending friendship and interest in other people's life just for one's own personal benefit.

❖ 12 ❖

Kukee are sha kyaalo kyilya kyeerua numbe ivele?

Ukoje kama fisi aliyemng'oa ng'ombe ziwani?

Are you like the hyena who pulled a cow out of a pool?

The Meru word *kyaalo* means a kind of hyena who is thought to be very clever and outrageous. According to a Meru story, the hyena pretended to be a friend of a cow who had fallen into a pool and was in danger of drowning. The *kyaalo* helped the cow out of the water to safety... and ate it.

Originally, the proverb may have functioned as a summary or a 'thesis' (Nwachukwa-Agbada 1994) at the end of the story (see also P 33, 58, 77 and 94). As such, the proverb is applied to a person who pretends friendship in order to use other people for his or her own benefit. The proverb functions as a warning to such a person that his or her evil intentions have been exposed.

❖ 13 ❖

Kukee are sha iruma lyia leemia nrie?

Ukoje kama *iruma* awasindikizaye nzige?

Are you like an *iruma* that escorts locusts?

The *iruma* is a bird that likes to follow swarms of locusts in order to eat them. The bird is almost white like a wild duck. In the proverb, the bird is a metaphor for a person who shares in other people's interests

merely for his or her personal gain. This proverb also functions as a warning to such a person that his or her selfish intentions are known.

❖ 14 ❖

Kwaakya meengyi afuua.

Ukichoma mengi yataharibika.

If you roast many of them together, they will be spoilt.

The Meru verb *ifuva* means 'to be spoiled' in the sense of food not properly cooked. If, for example, one roasts too many bananas in the fire at the same time, some of them will not be roasted well. The metaphor of roasting too many bananas refers to a person who gives way to lust, anger or other such strong feelings in his or her life. The proverb warns about such feelings because they endanger the social harmony and harm people as well as the person himself or herself.

❖ 15 ❖

Munyonyu wanumbwa winitaa wa ndee ukakwinita to muni.

Popo alisema atainamisha kichwa cha ndege, akajiinamisha mwenyewe.

**A bat said that it will bend a bird's head upside down,
but did so to itself.**

The proverb is applied as a warning to a person who intends to harm other people. A person with evil intentions may get hurt himself or herself, thus add to his or her own bitterness and become even more dangerous to the social harmony.

❖ 16 ❖

Ngongoyo ikaaloka iishi imboo iwore imakii imboo imburu.

Kipanga akishuka na kutaka kumwinua kifaranga huenda anainua jani kavu tu.

**A hawk that swoops down wanting to carry off a chicken
perhaps catches only a dry leaf.**

In the proverb, the 'hawk' (*ngongoyo*) is a metaphor for a person who aims at his or her own profit only and thus endangers the social harmony. The proverb functions as a warning to such a person that in doing this he or she may fail and lose everything. The proverb is also applied to a person who has eagerly sought his or her own benefit in a matter and failed. In this situation, the proverb functions as an explanation: This is what happens if someone aims at his or her personal profit only.

❖ 17 ❖

Leerwa lyiiwa likabe Membi likandenkaba Shora.

Jiwe lilitupwa kwa makusudi ya kumpiga Membi likampiga Shora.

A stone was cast at Membi, but it struck Shora instead.

Membi and *Shora* are personal names. The proverb warns a person who is intending to harm someone. A bad deed may harm people whom it was not intended to, but in this case also it causes social disharmony. The proverb is also used after such a thing has actually happened. In this situation the proverb just states an accomplished fact.

❖ 18 ❖

Kitanting' a mfee kiting' ia kyi nkyeku wa mwana?

Mzazi asipojali atahusikaje nyanya wa mtoto?

If a parent does not care,

how could the grandmother take responsibility?

In the proverb, *nkyeku wa mwana* (a 'child's grandmother') refers to a midwife. The proverb is used, for example, in a situation where people are working in the field and an argument arises about how the work should be done. For a worker, it is better to wait for the decision of the owner or the overseer rather than take the responsibility of a foreman and start behaving like one. In such a situation, the proverb functions as a warning not to meddle in a matter one is not responsible for because this would endanger the social harmony.

Keeping a distance

The previous proverb refers to a duality in the Meru ideal of living together. On the one hand, the proverbs emphasize mutual help, solidarity and the principle of living close together. On the other hand, according to the Meru ideal of the good life, their living together should not be suppressive. In the close-knit Meru society and their collectivistic way of life there should be room for individuals and families to live their own lives. This, too, is a prerequisite for social harmony.

❖ 19 ❖

Munua ibanga ana kyaara eeshi anuya kiri amakyi inuya urende lwamwi.

Mnoa panga au shoka akifikiri ananolea mti aweza kuunolea mguu wake.

The person who sharpens a panga or an axe thinks that he does it for a tree, but he can do it for his own foot.

In the proverb, the person who sharpens a panga (machete) or an axe is a metaphor for a rigid moralist. The proverb is applied to a person who sets tight principles and rules for other people. The proverb functions as a warning not to do this, because one day the same rules may hurt the moralist himself or herself.

❖ 20 ❖

Kwalolia lurie fisinde iwuka.

Ukiona maji yanabeba magogo kaa kando.

If you see that water carries logs, stay back.

During the rainy season, if one sees tree trunks in a river it is a sign of flood somewhere higher on the slopes of Mt. Meru where the flood water is washing down trees and carrying them away (*Fig. 4*). This is a signal of danger: The heavy masses of flood water may soon start thundering down in and over the riverbeds (P 72).



Fig. 4. Logs appearing in a river are a sign of an approaching flood (P 20).

The proverb is applied to a person who is intending to get involved in a quarrel of other people. The proverb functions as a warning to such a person, because mixing in other people's quarrels may be dangerous and harmful. More generally, the proverb is advice to keep away from quarreling people.

The Meru community expects its members to settle their quarrels themselves. But if, for example, quarreling neighbours fail to do this, other people may become involved in order to restore the social harmony in the community. This is vitally important to the good life, because unsettled quarrels may cause the individuals concerned to become ill. In addition, according to the Meru idea of health and illness, broken human relationships make the whole community ill (Harjula 1988: 25–27; 1989: 125–137; 1993: 130–132).



Fig. 5. Even a Land Rover can pass through a big mfumu (P 21).

❖ 21 ❖

Lla kutave sha mfumu ulya wasamisa mseseve!

Angalia usiwe kama mfumu uliohamisha mseseve!

Be careful that you are not like *mfumu* that drove *mseseve* away!

To a layman in botany, *mfumu* (*Ficus thonningii* Bl.) is a strange plant. It is a tree up to 30 m. tall or a shrub, terrestrial or hemi-epiphytic, occurring in a variety of habitats. *Mfumu* is often a strangler which grows upon and around a tree, slowly killing the tree and taking its place (*Fig. 5*). If *mfumu* is allowed to grow on the wall of a house, its aerial roots can break the wall and even destroy the house.

Mseseve (*Rauwolfia caffra* Sond.) is an important tree for the Meru. The bark of the roots of the tree is used to prepare a remedy for stomach troubles as well as an anthelmintic against ascaris and tapeworms (Harjula 1980: 45, 66).

In the proverb, both *mfumu* and *mseseve* are used as metaphors. *Mfumu* refers to a person who likes to advise other people or to meddle in their business in other ways. As a valuable tree, *mseseve* is a metaphor for a friend or a good neighbour. The proverb functions as a warning to a 'Know-it-all' ('Besserwisser') not to meddle in other people's business in an improper way lest he or she should drive them away and be left alone. A 'Know-it-all' has no friends.

More generally, the proverb reminds people that it is important for neighbours to allow each other to live their own lives (see also P 46 and 47). In this case the metaphor of *mfumu* carries an idea of damage and destruction, whereas *mseseve* refers to something valuable that is in danger (living together in harmony). In certain situations, *mfumu* may also refer to a person who uses other people for his or her own benefit.

A glass house

A close-knit community is transparent in many ways. People know each other and each other's lives. In a close-knit community, it is difficult and often even impossible to hide anything. Some Meru proverbs refer to this transparency of the community life.

❖ 22 ❖

Ilyaa ikabaa nkongo.

Alaye hipiga kengele.

One who eats rings the bell.

The word *nkongo* means a 'bell' tied to the neck of a goat or a cow so that people know the whereabouts of the animal or the herd. In everyday Meru life, the proverb is used in a variety of situations to refer, for example, to friendship or a quarrel. Usually, the proverb functions as a statement of fact: In a close-knit community nothing remains hidden.

❖ 23 ❖

Kwafisa ufu, kufisaa kiiyo ndi.

Hata ukificha kifo, huwezi kuficha kilio.

Even if you hide the death, you cannot conceal the wailing.

The long, wailing cries of women are a traditional Meru expression of grief at death. In the proverb, 'death' (*ufu*) is a metaphor for a crime or a bad deed. The proverb functions as a warning to a person who is planning to do something evil and hopes to be able to conceal his or her action. The proverb is also applied to a person who has been caught for thieving or for breaking the law or the Meru moral code in another way. In a general sense, the proverb is used by parents and relatives as a means of socializing children and youth.

❖ 24 ❖

Kwafisa muro, kufisaa musu ndi.

Hata ukificha moto, huwezi kuficha moshi.

Even if you hide the fire, you cannot conceal the smoke.

In normal Meru life, there is no need to hide a fire, be it a usual cooking-fire or a camp-fire with older people roasting meat and chatting around the fire. In the proverb, the idea of hiding the fire refers to thieves or other criminals who try to remain hidden. Sooner or later, however, the smoke from their camp-fire will be seen and it reveals their whereabouts. The proverb is applied in the same way as the previous proverb on death and wailing.

❖ 25 ❖

Umbi ubwaa nkonu to warawa ndi.

Mbege haozi siku ile inapovurugwa.

Beer does not go bad the day it is stirred up.

The word *umbi* means local beer, made of sorghum and banana. When making beer, it is important to mix it thoroughly because in this way any dirt in the liquid comes to the surface and can be skimmed off. If the stirring is not properly done, the drink can easily be spoiled during the process of fermentation. In the proverb, the metaphor of beer refers to human life.

Similar to the two previous proverbs, this proverb also is applied to a person who is planning to do something evil or has been caught doing a bad deed. If a person does not live his or her life according to certain rules and norms it will 'go bad'. In a close-knit and transparent community, the 'going bad' of a person's life is obvious to other people who have to 'taste' it.

In living close together people do not only know each other's outward way of life, but they also learn to know each other as individual persons.

❖ 26 ❖

Kyela ndooro ni nkia.

Kinachofanya mbega kuwa mzuri ni mkia.

The tail makes a Colobus monkey beautiful.

The real local beauty among the monkeys in the Meru area is the black and white Colobus with its long hair. The most striking feature of the animal is its long tail with a big 'brush' at the end (*Fig. 6*). In the proverb, a Colobus monkey is a metaphor for a human being. The proverb is applied to a person who is praised for his or her good reputation. The proverb simply states a fact of life: A person's nature is revealed by what is seen in his or her life. The goodness of a person is manifested in his or her deeds and behaviour.



Fig. 6. The black and white Colobus or Guereza lives high up in trees and feeds on leaves (P 26).

❖ 27 ❖

Nsari aturāa ilomi ndi.

Mwema hakosi kasoro.

A good person is not flawless.

This proverb, too, is used in a situation where someone is praised as a good person. In contrast to the previous one, the proverb functions as a realistic reminder: Even a good person has his or her faults. The proverb is used either by the person himself or herself as a sign of realistic modesty, or by other people. In other contexts, the proverb functions as a warning to a person who regards himself or herself as a perfect being and behaves accordingly.

❖ 28 ❖

Yaanri likala na savana lisaama ibeeni.

Kondoo akila na mbuzi ataiga tabia zake.

If a lamb eats with a goat, it will imitate the goat's habits.

The Meru word *ibeeni* refers to a species of Convolvulaceae that creeps and grows around the branches of a bush. Goats jump up in order to pull these plants down to the ground and then eat them. It is not the usual habit of lambs to do this but if a lamb stays with goats it also starts jumping in the same way. The proverb functions as a warning not to mix with bad people, because it results in learning undesirable habits. This is another aspect of human life the Meru have seen in living close together in a transparent community.

❖ 29 ❖

Nsavi akoovaa na saka.

Mchawi hujificha katika ugonjwa.

A sorcerer hides in a disease.

Even in a close-knit transparent community, there is at least one thing that may remain unnoticed. That is the activity of a sorcerer (*nsavi*) who is regarded as a destructive and terrifying person. The Meru believe that a sorcerer can cause illnesses and even death by using poisons and other means such as suggestive magic (Harjula 1980: 116, 163, 166, 208; *Fig. 7*). It is typical of the Meru idea of sorcery that there is no exact knowledge about the identity of a sorcerer but just suspicions and rumours.

In the context of an illness, the proverb functions as a warning or advice to be aware of the possibility of sorcery and to turn to a healer (*Fig. 8*) in order to get proper help. Like the Chaga (Ntiro 1953: 11–13) and the Luguru (Hadumbavhinu 1968: 20–24), the Meru make a clear distinction between a sorcerer (*nsavi*) and a healer (*mwaanga*). Among some other peoples, such as the Zaramo, the functional distinction between *mchawi* and *mganga* (Swahili words) is not so clear (Swantz 1970: 319–322).

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Fig. 7. A small clay figure called *nungu* is used by some Meru sorcerers to try to harm people (P 29).



Fig. 8. Mr. Sainei Kitoi Mirau Nassari, a famous Meru healer at work (P 29).

The transparency of their lives has given the Meru a realistic attitude towards people: There are good and bad people, and even a good person is not flawless. This realism in relation to human beings widens into a realistic attitude towards the endlessly varied human life in general.

The community consists of all kinds of people living or trying to live together. There are people with a sweet tongue, and there are those who use destructive words (Chapter 3). There are hospitable and generous people, but there are the greedy and selfish ones as well (Chapter 4). There are the rich and the poor (Chapter 5). Some people are industrious, while some are lazy (Chapter 6). Some people have a sense of proportion, some have not (Chapter 7). And finally, there are the young and the old people (Chapters 8 and 9).

Even in the midst of this variety, solidarity and social harmony remain ideals of the common good life. The proverbs take the variety of human existence as a reality of life, but also as a challenge, as a point of departure on the road to the good life.

In the last instance, it is God who grants the good life (Chapter 10). A human being, however, is responsible for his or her own good life as well as for that of the community. It is in the midst of the endlessly varied human existence that the Meru proverbs function as signposts to the good life.