

7. SENSE OF PROPORTION AS A PREREQUISITE FOR THE GOOD LIFE

The importance of having a sense of proportion has already been implied in connection with many proverbs, for example, with those related to boasting (P 37–39), extravagance (P 48–49), greed and envy (P 57–59), and work (P 69). Nevertheless, there are so many other Meru proverbs explicitly emphasizing the importance of a sense of proportion as a prerequisite for the good life that the topic requires a chapter of its own. In everyday life, realism and sense of proportion are needed in a person's relation to his or her own skills, in human relationships, in all kinds of situations, and so on.

Overestimation of one's own skills

In everyday life, the lack of a person's sense of proportion is often manifested as an overestimation of his or her own skills (*Figs. 15 & 16*). Some Meru proverbs warn about this kind of overestimation because it harms a person and his or her life.

❖ 81 ❖

Nri ukanlema ifie kumakii yaarukya?

Mti ukimshinda nyani, unawezaje kuupanda?

If a tree is too much for a baboon, how could you climb it?

In two proverbs analysed in Chapter 3, a baboon is a metaphor for a person who makes empty promises (P 33 and 34). In this proverb, a baboon appears in a more positive light, as a metaphor for a skillful person or an expert. The proverb is applied to a person who intends to do something that obviously is too difficult even for the most skillful expert. The

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Figs. 15 & 16. Gelding a bull is a skill of its own and requires a lot of expertise (P 81).

function of the proverb is to warn such a person not to harm himself or herself by trying to accomplish something impossible. The proverb is also used in a context where a person has tried to do something too difficult and failed. In this context, the proverb functions as an explanation: The person failed because he or she tried to accomplish something that is even beyond the ability of an expert.

❖ 82 ❖

Kutasandie mura na muro!

Usichanganye maji na moto!

Don't mix water and fire!

This proverb crystallizes its message in the form of a wordplay, based on the rather similar pronunciation of *mura* ('water') and *muro* ('fire'). The proverb is applied to a person who overestimates his or her skills and strength in trying to do incompatible things at the same time, like carrying a bunch of firewood and a heavy bucket of water. The proverb functions as a warning to such a person not to divide his or her efforts in an impossible way.

❖ 83 ❖

Kwaawwa mbari ivili lumwi lwiraa mbueny.

Ukimenya mbavu mbili, mmoja utakupiga puani.

If you gnaw two ribs, one will strike you on the nose.

The proverb (*Fig. 17*) is used in a context where a person tries to do several things at the same time, for example, to wash the dishes, to prepare a meal and to sweep the floor. The proverb functions as a warning to such a person. If you try to do too many things at the same time, one of them will be spoilt or even hurt you. In another meaning, the proverb also functions as a warning to a hoggish person who is known for his or her bottomless greed.

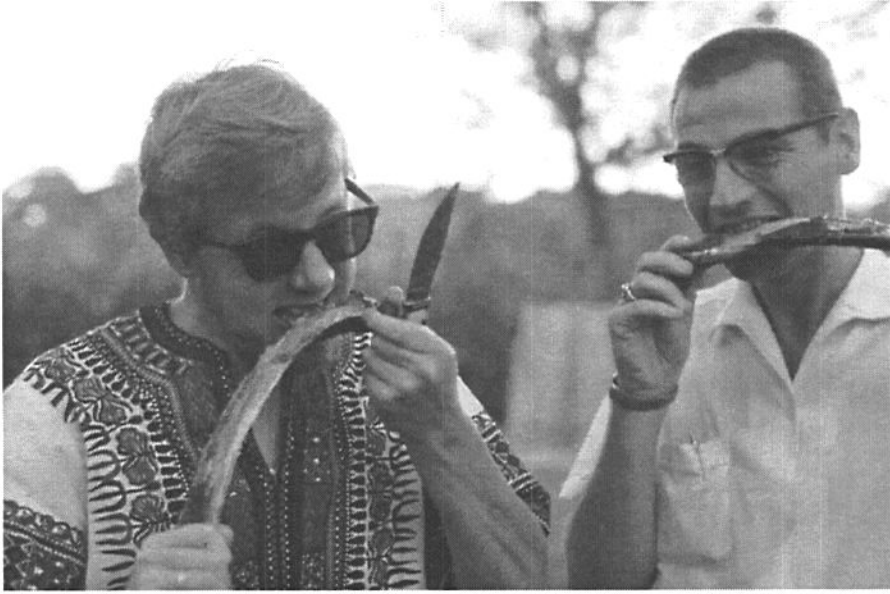


Fig. 17. There is work enough in gnawing one rib of a cow at a time (P 83).

Showing off in borrowed plumes

A person who tries to do things beyond his or her skills and strength may act in this way because of ambition or demonstration. Such a person has often lost the sense of proportion also in the sense that he or she likes to show off 'in borrowed plumes'. Some Meru proverbs warn people about this kind of behaviour.

❖ 84 ❖

Kutaare na ifumu lya ndu ungi.

Usicheze na mkuki wa mtu mwingine.

Don't dance with another person's spear.

The verb *yaara* means 'to perform a dance' (while other people surrounding are drumming and singing). The verb also has a connotation of wandering around and boasting, making a show of oneself. The proverb is

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used in a context where a person boasts of borrowed money, dress, animal, plough or other things, as if they were his or her own.

The proverb is also applied to a person who boasts of the results of other people's work, as if they were his or her own doing. Finally, the proverb is used in a context where a person makes himself or herself important by referring to influential people he or she is supposed to know well. In all these three contexts, the function of the proverb is to warn a person of his or her ridiculous behaviour.

❖ 85 ❖

Isara lya nndu ungi livaa iraa ndi.

Haifai kuvaa nguo ya mtu mwingine.

It is useless to wear another person's garment.

The Meru word *isara* means a garment that in the earlier times was made of skin. Nowadays almost any garment is called *isara*. The proverb is applied in contexts similar to those of the previous proverb, and it has also the same function.

❖ 86 ❖

Ikoko lya nri ungyi livaa ivandakiria nriny ungyi ndi.

Ganda la mti halifai kugongomewa katika mti mwingine.

It is useless to cover a tree with the bark of another tree.

According to the Meru informants, the proverb means that another person's child does not feel like one of your own, and that you treat him or her in a different way. Thinking of the proverb as a statement, it could also be understood as a warning not to try to do an impossible thing. In the recorded material, however, the proverb follows immediately after the previous two proverbs. This would seem to suggest that the proverb is used in contexts similar to those of the other two proverbs with the same warning function.

Realism in human relationships

In a close-knit community like that of the Meru, being a realist and having sense of proportion in human relationships is a vital prerequisite for the good life. In this respect, the lack of a person's sense of proportion easily leads to the underestimation of other people and arrogance towards them. Some Meru proverbs warn about these attitudes because they are harmful and even dangerous to the well-being of people.

❖ 87 ❖

Mbeva ya ilya nruvi inyaa ndi.

Panya alaye kibuyu hawezi kuitwa mdogo.

The rat that eats a calabash cannot be called small.

In this proverb, the rat is a metaphor for an enemy who looks harmless but is, in fact, very dangerous. Perhaps a rat makes only a tiny hole in the calabash, but still its contents flow away. The proverb is applied to a person who despises his or her enemy as a weakling. The proverb warns against belittling any enemy. An enemy is an enemy, no matter how harmless he or she may look.

❖ 88 ❖

Kwaleta shoka ukyele ikuvikawo iwe.

Ukiamua nyoka chura itakuweka wewe.

If you take a snake for a frog, you will be in danger.

There are cobras, mambas, puff-adders and other kinds of snakes in the Meru area. A sudden rasp of a snake in the grass may be taken as the sound of a frog by an incautious wanderer. In the proverb, a snake is a readily understood metaphor for an enemy. The proverb functions as a warning to a person who obviously underestimates his or her enemy. More generally, the proverb reminds people of the need for caution in their

everyday life. For example, a quarrel among other people may look harmless, but if you interfere in it you may find yourself in trouble (see P 20).

❖ 89 ❖

Iwe lyaia nruvi: 'Manya ishipara!'

Jiwe liliambia kibuyu: 'Usinipasue!'

A stone told a calabash: 'Don't split me!'

This proverb presents its message in the form of a sarcastic request of a stone to a calabash. In the proverb, a calabash is a metaphor for a common human. A stone refers to a person who is more powerful, for example, to a rich neighbour or an influential leader. The proverb is applied to an ordinary person who wants to harm a more powerful person. The proverb functions as a warning to such a person because he or she will not succeed but only cause troubles for himself or herself.

❖ 90 ❖

Kwakabwa nkyiri kyuumu kuiyye.

Ukipigwa na mti mkavu jililie.

If a dry tree strikes you, just cry for yourself.

This proverb is related to a context similar to that of the previous proverb, the context now being looked at from the point of view of the 'stone'. In the proverb, a dry tree or its branch is a metaphor for a poor person. The proverb simply states a fact of life: If a poor person hurts you, don't lose your temper. You just have to take it because you cannot get any compensation from the poor. This, too, is a sign of realism and a sense of proportion.

❖ 91 ❖

Mayoo a ndu ungyi alee nsanga.

Meno ya mtu mwingine hula mchanga.

The other person's teeth eat sand.

This proverb deals with a special case of underestimating other people. In the proverb, eating sand is a metaphor for having to do something unappealing like covering a bad-smelling latrine or a garbage pit with earth. The proverb is used in a context where a person asks neighbours or other people to do these unpleasant jobs for him or her. The proverb functions as a reproach and a refusal: I am not so stupid as you seem to think. Eat your own sand! This is the basic use and meaning of the proverb. The derivative meaning of the proverb has already been discussed in connection with wealth and property (P 59).

Calmness and caution

In a sudden dangerous situation, a person easily loses his or her sense of proportion and acts accordingly. Some Meru proverbs warn against hasty action and emphasize the importance of calmness and caution as elements of the good life.

❖ 92 ❖

Ivia lyaaka nunguny likeenda murony.

Pofu ilitoka katika chungu ikaenda motoni.

Froth got out of the cooking-pot and went into the fire.

Froth in the cooking-pot is a metaphor for a person in a dangerous situation desperately wanting to escape from it. The proverb functions as a warning to such a person not to panic but to keep calm, because a rushed decision and action may put the person in a still worse situation.

❖ 93 ❖

Kitaare kwamiila kuteeve!

Usiibe kabla usiku haujaingia!

Don't steal before night!

The realistic metaphor of stealing is taken from real life. Nevertheless, the proverb does not advise people to steal during the night when they cannot be seen and identified. The idea of stealing in the daytime refers to a foolish and an unconsidered action. The proverb is used in a context where a person is intending to do something foolish and hasty. The proverb functions as a warning and an encouragement to such a person: Don't do this! Help may be closer than you think!

❖ 94 ❖

Lyanle ndu ili ndi llia lyale Nravi.

Hili halijamla mtu ni lile lililomla Nravi.

**This one who had never eaten a human
is the one who ate Nravi.**

In the Meru stories, *Nravi* is known as a proud person who did not fear anything. While other people locked the doors in the evenings for fear of wild animals, *Nravi* slept with his doors wide open. One night *Nravi* was eaten by a lion or a hyena. As his last words he said: 'This one who had never eaten a human has now started with me!'. The proverb functions as a warning to a foolhardy person who is intending to do something foolish and harmful.

Reasonable timidity and fear of the future

The previous proverbs emphasize the importance of calmness in a sudden dangerous situation and the value of caution in general. Caution may be based on timidity. From the point of view of the good life, timidity can be a negative attitude towards life, for example, if it hinders people from taking up their normal duties (P 71). On the other hand, there is also timidity that can be described as a sound element of the good life.



Fig. 18. Baboons are timid but harmful animals (P 95).

❖ 95 ❖

Mafie lia eeṛea, llyo eengifwa.

Nyani waliongezeka kwa sababu walikuwa waoga.

The baboons multiplied because they were timid.

❖ 96 ❖

Iṛapupu lyeeṛea likafita ukuu.

Fisi aliogopa akafika hata uzee.

The hyena was timid and reached an old age.

In the Meru area, baboons often move around in big crowds (Fig. 18). They are the hateful visitors to the banana plantations and gardens who empty the fruit trees amazingly fast if they are not noticed in time. Baboons are harmful in many other ways, too. During a visit to *Engare Nanyuki*, I once left my car alone with the front windows open. When I

came back I found that baboons had entered the car and carried away not only the bananas I had left in the car but also my sweater and my pipe!

On the other hand, baboons usually are timid animals who quickly disappear if other animals and humans approach them. Hyenas also are wary animals who like to kill newly born young or aged and weakened animals, but never attack healthy adult ones.

In the proverbs, these timid animals are a metaphor for a person who knows his or her abilities, strengths and weaknesses and acts accordingly. A person with reasonable timidity does not take unnecessary risks or start something he or she would not be able to complete, for example, building a too large house or buying too many cows.

The idea of a timid being multiplying refers to success in general. The image of reaching old age means a happy and a good life, as old age in many ways is the climax of human life (Chapter 9). The proverbs function as a warning and a reminder, emphasizing that sound timidity protects a person and his or her life. In the long run, reasonable timidity gives better results than foolhardy courage.

Reasonable timidity as an element of the good life, however, has nothing to do with fear of the future. This is clearly expressed by the next proverb.

❖ 97 ❖

Numa ikulla sheni.

Nyuma hujitazamia yenyewe.

That which is behind looks at itself.

The Meru word *numa* means 'back' or 'behind' in sayings like *illa numa*, 'to look back', 'to look behind'. In the proverb, however, *numa* is related to time. According to the Meru concept of time, the past is known, it lies in front of a person before his or her eyes. The future is not known and does not even exist as yet, it is behind one's back. In relation to time,

numa refers to the future. A similar use of the words 'before' and 'behind' is also known in other Bantu cultures and languages (Mbiti 1969: 15–28).

The proverb is applied to a person who fears the future, being worried about future events he or she cannot influence or control in any way. The proverb functions as an encouragement to such a person not to worry about the future because the future will resolve itself. A person should concentrate his or her attention and efforts upon today's tasks and responsibilities. This, too, is a sign of a realistic attitude towards life that has been the theme of this chapter.

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Altogether, a person with a sense of proportion and a realistic attitude towards life knows his or her skills and resources, strengths and weaknesses, and lives accordingly. Such a person also knows his or her status or position. In the Meru community, the status of a person and the role expectations directed towards him or her by people basically depend on age. This is the case especially in relation to children, youth and elderly people, as will be presented in the next two chapters.