

## 10. GOD AS THE GIVER OF THE GOOD LIFE

The Meru can use the same word, *iṛuva*, for both God and the sun. Nevertheless, they make a clear distinction between these two. They do not pray to the sun, but the sun probably represents the most important symbol or manifestation of *Iṛuva*'s life-giving power. In this sense the Meru also speak of the sun as God's 'image' (Harjula 1969: 74–76).

In everyday speech the two meanings of the word *iṛuva* are clearly differentiated, for example, by using different prefixes in connection with accompanying verbs. When the word *iṛuva* refers to God, the verb takes the personal class prefix *a-*: *Iṛuva a-kee ule*, 'God is up there' (see also the following proverbs). Instead, the sentence *Iṛuva li-kee ule* means 'The sun is up there'.

It is my impression that nowadays the word *iṛuva* is used almost exclusively in reference to God, whereas another word *mwi* means the sun. *Iṛuva* is the traditional customary or Meru proper name for god, now used also by Christians and Muslims. In this respect, there are no problems with 'the theology of capital letters' (Tanner 1993: 31) but one can simply translate '*Iṛuva*' as 'God'.

In addition to the customary name *Iṛuva*, the Meru use many descriptive names to refer to God, such as *Mutana*, 'Creator'; *Mamwavi*, 'Giver of gifts'; *Muni finya*, 'He who has the power' (the often heard additional *yoose*, 'all', may be Christian influence); *Mwuwurusa*, 'He who feeds'; *Mweleka*, 'Helper'; *Makenge (Makinge)*, 'Protector'; *Nkīra saka*, 'He who heals' and *Mwumisia*, 'Judge'. The descriptive names crystallize traditional Meru ideas and beliefs of God (Harjula 1969: 34–49).

The name of God (*Iṛuva*) is commonly used in Meru greetings, blessings, curses and other genre categories. God is also mentioned or referred to in some proverbs where He appears in His different roles.

❖ 117 ❖

*Isekye lyaario ndu ni Iruva muni.*

Chema huazimwa kwa mtu na Mungu mwenyewe.

**Good things are lent to a human being by God Himself.**

In the proverb, God is mentioned in the role of ‘Giver of gifts’ (*Mamwavi*). This descriptive name of God is derived from the verb *iava* which means ‘to give’ or ‘to grant’ as a gift. The proverb is used in a situation where people wonder at the gentle sunshine after months of heavy rains (P 20 and 72) or the rain after a too long dry season, a good harvest, a newly born baby (P 98), or another thing regarded as a gift from God. The proverb functions as a statement relating a good harvest and other good things to the traditional Meru ideas of God. In the last instance, all that is good comes from *Iruva*, even though people also have to do their best (P 52–53, 56, 66–71).

❖ 118 ❖

*Iruva aore wembe na ubata.*

Mungu ana pembe na kata.

**God has a horn and a dipper.**

In connection with *Iruva*, the ‘horn’ (*wembe*) is a metaphor for God’s wealth. The Meru image is parallel to the idea of the ‘horn of plenty’ (*cornucopia*) which is common in many cultures. The Meru ‘dipper’ (*ubata*) is usually made of a calabash with one end cut off and fixed to the end of a stick. With His dipper God deals out His riches to people. The use and the function of the proverb are the same as those of the previous proverb. God is rich, He provides everything.

❖ 119 ❖

*Ata kwasina are kumakii ifikia Iruva ndi.*

Hata uwe na mali isiyo na mipaka huwezi kuwa sawa na Mungu.

**No matter how rich you are,  
you cannot become equal with God.**

This proverb also is related to the wealth of *Iruva* with His horn and dipper. The proverb is applied to a person who boasts of his or her wealth or importance. The proverb warns the person against boasting, because everything he or she has is a gift from God, the richest ‘Giver of gifts’ (see also P 57 and 59).

❖ 120 ❖

*Kutasukue Iruva ndewu!*

Usionyeshe tumbo kwa Mungu!

**Don’t show off your stomach to God!**

Showing off one’s stomach to *Iruva* is an image of human pride and arrogance. The proverb is addressed to a person who leaves the crops unharvested or throws food away, for example, after a meal. The function of the proverb is to warn such a person against despising the gifts of God who is ‘He who feeds’ (*Mwuwurusa*). More generally, the proverb relates to the idea of God as the ‘Giver of gifts’ and functions as a warning about a wasteful attitude towards any of God’s gifts.

❖ 121 ❖

*Uro lyoose ludovia kake, Iruva ye adovia ndi.*

Kila mlima hupunguka, Mungu hapunguki.

**Every mountain grows less, but God does not diminish.**

There are two mountains dominating the landscape of Northern Tanzania, Mt. Kilimanjaro (6000 m.) and Mt. Meru (4700 m.). The shape of Mt. Meru with its huge crater (see *Fig. 1* on p. 2) may have given the Meru the idea that in earlier times the mountain has been higher than it is today (as it really has been). The effects of erosion also are clearly seen during and after the rainy season. The flood water does not only bring silt and stones down from the higher slopes of Mt. Meru but it also causes landslides.

In the proverb, the image of a mountain 'growing less' emphasizes the greatness, stability and permanence of *Iṛuva*. The proverb is used, for example, in a situation where a person has recovered from a severe illness. The proverb functions as a statement relating the event to the idea of God as 'He who has the power' (*Muni finya*: about *finya* see p. 95) and 'He who heals' (*Nkiṛa saka*).

The proverb is also applied to a person who is in a leading position and has more power than common people. Here the proverb functions as a warning and a reminder: Human power and fame always have their limits, only God is permanent and endless.

❖ 122 ❖

*Iṛuva ni nkoo.*

Mungu ni kijana.

**God is young.**

The proverb is used by a person in a difficult situation where the person, for example, is not able to defend himself or herself against a troublemaker or oppressor. With this proverb, the person appeals to *Iṛuva* for help. The proverb is used especially by older people. The idea of God's being young originates in times when young Meru men served as soldiers defending old people, women and children against the attacks of outsiders. The proverb refers to God who is the 'Helper' (*Mweleka*) and the 'Protector' (*Makenge, Makinge*).

❖ 123 ❖

*Iṛuva amanyaa.*

Mungu hujua.

**God knows.**

In everyday Meru life, this statement is one of the most often heard proverbs. It is used in connection with accidents, floods, sudden deaths and other disasterous situations where there is no answer to the burning ques-

tion 'Why did this happen?'. The proverb functions as a means of accommodation which helps people to adjust themselves to an inexplicable disaster.

In earlier times, the proverb has also probably been employed in court by a person who could not prove his or her innocence. Here the proverb functioned as an appeal to God who is the final 'Judge' (*Mwumisia*) and knows the truth. At present, the proverb seems to be losing its original meaning. At least the Swahili version of the proverb is frequently used in all kinds of everyday situations. I have heard, for example, students use the proverb after failing a minor examination.

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Many proverbs and ideas of God presented above are almost as though they were coming directly from the Bible. For example, P 117 recalls the words of the apostle Paul in 1 Cor.4: 7: 'Didn't God give you everything you have?'. So there remains the question of Christian influence on the Meru ideas of God. This question, however, falls outside the scope of this study.

Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the genre analysis suggests that the basic Meru ideas of God crystallized in *Iruva*'s descriptive names and in the proverbs represent traditional beliefs and are not necessarily Christian influenced (Harjula 1969: 16–20). In addition, similar ideas of God have been known, for example, among the Shambaa before one could speak of an extensive Christian influence among them (Johanssen & Döring 1915: 67–69; Wohlrab 1929: 59–63).

Within the scope of this study it is enough to note that, in the last instance, it is God who grants and maintains the good life, even though people also have to do their best.

