

4. HOSPITALITY, GENEROSITY AND THE GOOD LIFE

Hospitality is an essential value and element of the Meru ideal of a good life. Moving around the Meru area, I have often been invited for a cup of tea by people whom I have not known. The reason for such an invitation was not my looking like an interesting visitor, but the old Meru custom of showing hospitality to a stranger. In fact, it is a matter of honour to a Meru family to give something – an egg, a banana, a piece of chicken or a cup of tea – even to the occasional passer-by.

If one is invited for a proper meal by a Meru friend, it is impossible to refuse the invitation. A common meal is not only a symbol of a good relationship but, ideally, eating together, and talking and rejoicing together strengthen the solidarity and the unity of the participants. For this reason, even after so many years back in Finland, I find myself choosy about with whom I eat.

Hospitality and generosity as sharing

In the Meru socio-cultural context, hospitality is a practical dimension of generosity, greatness of heart and an open attitude to other people.

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Mwaango nrue uturaa ndu aakaa ndi.

Mlango wazi haukosi mtu wa kuingia.

An open door does not lack for entrants.

An ‘open door’ (*mwaango nrue*) is a metaphor for hospitality and generosity. The proverb is applied to a hospitable person or family by neighbours who day by day observe the number of visitors entering the

house. The proverb also functions as advice to a person who complains of being left alone. Look at yourself and your own attitudes! Your loneliness may be your own fault. Perhaps the door to your home and life is not open to other people to enter.

As social values of a good life, hospitality and generosity mean mutual giving and receiving.

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Shoonga yeerwaa andu imia.

Chakula kinaoteswa mahali kitakapoota.

Food is sown where it will grow.

‘Sowing food’ refers, for example, to the sowing of maize. It is vitally important where and when the maize is sown. The field must be properly cultivated, stones removed and the water supplies secured, otherwise there will be no harvest at all. The proverb reminds people that hospitality and generosity mean mutual sharing. When a person shows generosity or gives help, the person mutually expects a similar attitude and behaviour in return. More generally, the proverb functions as advice to use one’s property and resources carefully.

Finally, in the Meru socio-cultural context hospitality and generosity mean sharing in a deeper sense than just an outward mutual giving and taking.

Sharing as mutual influence

In a close-knit society people influence each other’s lives in many ways. In the Meru culture, visits are regarded as a means for personal contact and mutual influence. A guest influences the lives of the host and his family, and vice versa. This idea is crystallized in two Meru proverbs.

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Sara ikaaloka uriony itiyya fo ifuli.

Swala akitumbukia mtegoni huacha unywele.

A gazelle that tumbles into a trap leaves behind a hair.

In this proverb, the Meru word *urio* means a trap in the sense of a pit that is dug in order to catch animals. If the animal gets out of the pit, it will leave a sign of its visit in the pit. This often happens with a gazelle whose coat easily sheds hairs as the animal struggles to get out of a trap.

A gazelle leaving behind its hairs is a metaphor for a visitor. The proverb is applied to a family or a person who experience something unexpected soon after having a visitor. The proverb functions as an explanation for the unexpected, be it joy or sorrow, success or misfortune, recovering from an illness or getting ill.

After such a visit, if something unexpected happens, there are speculations about the guest's influence. Was the visitor a person with a 'good' or an 'evil heart'? (Harjula 1980: 96, 116; 1986: 91.) Did the guest speak in a friendly manner or did he or she use aggressive or otherwise inappropriate words? Or was the visitor perhaps an envious neighbour with an 'evil eye'? (Harjula 1980: 152.)

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Urende lwende-ende lushaa lurie mwinga ana lushe lurie laa.

Mguu uendaendo ukirudi una mwiba ama umande.

When a wandering foot returns it has got either a thorn or dew.

This proverb also refers to people's mutual influence during a visit and functions as an explanation for something unexpected after such a visit. In the proverb, a 'wandering foot' that returns means a person who comes home after paying a visit. A 'thorn' (*mwinga*) is a metaphor for bad luck or even a curse, 'dew' (*laa*) is an image of blessing.

In the light of these two proverbs, outward hospitality as such does not guarantee the good life. Hospitality is a vital dimension of living

together, but mutual visits may bring a blessing or bad luck to the guest and the host. This is why a 'good guest' is expected and always welcomed.

❖ 45 ❖

Mwiini nsha ashe na mbengye.

Mgeni mwema aje kupitia mlango kuu.

May a good guest come through the big door.

The word *mbengye* means the door or the gate in the fence through which cattle are brought home in the evenings. Metaphorically, the word also refers to a Meru custom of taking out two teeth in a child's lower jaw. This has been done so that a sick child can be given water and food through the hole even if he or she is unconscious. The hole is called *mbengye*.

In the proverb, *mbengye* refers to the cattle-gate (cattle are a Meru symbol of good luck and prosperity). The proverb reminds and advises people to welcome a 'good guest' (*mwiini nsha*) with open doors, because such a visitor brings a blessing to the house. A good guest comes with good intentions and welcome gifts.

The proverb may also function as a wish in a difficult situation. May a good guest appear now and help us! For example, during a long drought I used to bring water from Makumira to my friends and their families in the dry Kikatiti area. I had always been received by them in a friendly manner, but at this difficult time there was some extra respect and kindness in their attitude towards me.

Sharing and tactfulness

Hospitality and generosity create situations where people influence each other, either for good or bad. This kind of sharing means that the host, the guest and all participants concerned are responsible for their behaviour.

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Varia isanga lyangwa mbung'wa litatotike!

Kanyaga dunia ya watu wengine polepole isitoboke!

**Step upon other people's world carefully,
so that it may not break!**

The proverb is addressed to a person who is eager to give advice or otherwise interfere in other people's business. The proverb functions as a warning or advice to such a person. This is none of your business, don't get involved in it! More generally, the proverb reminds people of tactfulness. One should be very considerate in getting involved in other people's lives, or otherwise one will cause more harm than good.

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Kukee are sha Mambuyo ateerraa iyanu?

Ukoje kama Bwanashoto asiye na mpaka?

Are you like Mister Left-Handed who knows no limits?

This proverb also is a warning not to interfere in other people's affairs. The Meru word *mambuyo* means a left-handed person. In the proverb, *Mambuyo* is used as a name and a metaphor for a person whose behaviour deviates from what is commonly regarded as normal tactfulness among the Meru (see also P 19–21).

Extravagance and misuse of generosity

Even if hospitality and generosity are important social values to the Meru and vital elements of their ideal of the good life, generosity has also its limits. There are situations where generosity changes into extravagance, and that is no longer a value but rather a sign of a person's stupidity and lack of a sense of proportion.

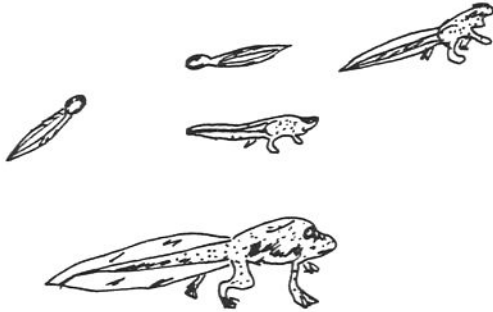


Fig. 10. Tadpoles in different stages of evolution (P 48).

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Kilwa kyavia vana nkia.

Chura aliwagawia watoto mkia.

A frog donated its tail to children.

The metaphorical idea in the proverb has been taken from the biological evolution of a frog. A frog from the time it leaves the egg to the time when it takes its final shape is called a tadpole. A tadpole has a tail (*Fig. 10*), whereas a frog in its final shape is tailless.

The verb *iavia* does not mean just giving but 'to give as a gift', 'to grant' and 'to donate' (to somebody). The tailless frog is a metaphor for a person who is too generous. The proverb is used as a warning to or about a person who wastes his or her possessions for the benefit of other people or shows them unreasonable hospitality beyond his or her actual resources. In doing this the person just harms himself or herself.

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Kukee are sha njama ilya yaremia irapupu numba?

Ukoje kama mnyama aliyemchimbua fisi nyumba?

Are you like an animal who dug a house for a hyena?

This proverb also is addressed to a person who is inclined to show unreasonable generosity to other people. The metaphor of a hyena gives the proverbial question a special connotation that makes it differ from the previous proverb. It is the habit of hyenas to occupy holes in the ground dug by other animals and live in them. The hyena is here (cf. P 12 and 96) a metaphor for a person who abuses other people's benevolence. The proverb functions as a warning to a person who is in danger of being misused in this way.

A person who misuses other people's hospitality or generosity is often lazy. Instead of working, such a person likes to spend his or her days moving around from house to house, sitting in the shade of a tree and chatting. He or she is not interested in giving a helping hand to the hosts, but rather requests a cup of tea or other services. In the long run, such a chatterer becomes a pain in the neck to everybody.

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Kisiaa kya rembo kiwaa ndoo.

Matako humwua urafiki.

Buttocks kill friendship.

'Buttocks' (*kisiaa*) refer to a person's sitting position on the ground or on a chair. In the proverb, buttocks become a metaphor for a chatterer's laziness (P 66), as has been described above. The proverb functions as a warning to such a person. A lazy person loses friends by continuously depending on their generosity without doing anything himself or herself.

Ideals and reality

In trying to attain a good life in relation to hospitality and generosity, people often have to face the conflict between an ideal and the realities of life. Ideally, all people should be equal in enjoying hospitality and generosity. In reality, however, some people are more equal than others.

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Ikee washeny iishi ikee irwa na mbarata ndi.

Mende aliyeko siniani hamfahamu yule apandaye ukutani.

A cockroach on a tray does not know the one on the wall.

A cockroach is a nasty and greedy insect. One never stops wondering how cockroaches get into a closed tin of sugar or a box of flour. But there they are when you start baking and open the tin and the box! In the proverb, the cockroach on a tray is a metaphor for a selfish and greedy person who has got everything he or she needs.

The proverb has a bitter taste. It is used by a poor person who urgently needs the help of a prosperous neighbour but does not get it. In this kind of situation, the proverb is employed also by other people in reference to the selfish neighbour. The proverb functions as an explanation to the situation based on a common experience: The rich don't know or don't want to know the troubles of the poor.

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In the Meru ideal of the good life, hospitality and generosity are important elements. In reality, however, they create situations of mutual influence which may even be harmful to people. Sharing, generosity and hospitality must be accompanied by a sense of proportion and tactfulness of all the parties concerned.