

5. WEALTH, PROPERTY AND THE GOOD LIFE

In any society, a person's relative wealth or poverty and one's personal attitude towards them would seem to effect the quality of his or her life. In the oral Meru tradition, too, there are many proverbs concerning property and possessions and the proper attitude towards them. Some of these proverbs are closely related to those analysed in Chapter 4 (Hospitality, generosity and the good life), while the rest deal with other dimensions of the good life.

As far as the relative wealth and poverty of the Meru population are concerned, there are clear differences between people and families. Land has always been important to the Meru for agriculture and cattle-keeping (Japhet & Seaton 1970). Traditionally, lands have belonged to different clans who have been regarded as their 'owners'. For a family, 'owning' a plot of land has mainly meant the right to build a house and to cultivate one's 'own' fields. Some people may have vast fields, whereas others only cultivate small gardens.

Some Meru may have a more or less regular income from their jobs as civil servants or teachers, or from their coffee and banana plantations. Some earn their living as shopkeepers, butchers, barkeepers, and so on. There are bigger and smaller herds of cattle and goats. Like anywhere, there are houses in good and poor condition, and well and badly dressed people. In short, there are economic differences between people and families among the Meru.

Persistence and thrift

❖ **52** ❖

Alya akaa kyaai wwo aakaa kiwe.

Zinapotoka ndizi moja moja ndipo kinapotoka kichane kizima.

**Where bananas come out one by one,
there comes out a whole bunch.**

❖ **53** ❖

Kinnya kyuukaa kyaai.

Kidogo hutoa kingi.

A little gives much.

Both of these proverbs are used in a situation where people hesitate about whether they should start a project that looks too small and useless, for example, to start to cultivate a small garden. The proverbs encourage people to use time and energy even for small things because they often give much in return. More generally, the proverbs remind people that a person cannot have anything big and important without starting with something small and humble. Don't despise a small beginning!

❖ **54** ❖

Sanga shiti iyo shaangu ya yeera.

Kitu kidogo ndicho chepesi cha kutupa.

A small thing is easy to throw away.

The Meru word *sanga* is related to *nsanga*, 'sand'. In the proverb, *sanga* means a thing that is small in the sense that it is regarded as worthless. The proverb is applied to a person who is eager to dispose of small things like a piece of cord, old tools and broken kitchenware. The proverb

functions as a warning to such a person not to throw away anything that seems worthless at the moment, because one day the thing may be needed.

❖ 55 ❖

Kwansama kutakore ikaari!

Ukihama usichome kambi!

When you break camp don't burn the campsite!

The Meru word *ikaari* refers here to a place where especially old people like to stay during the cold season, eat plenty of meat and gain strength. The same campsite is used over a period of several years. The proverb functions as a warning to a person who intends to throw away something that no longer seems needed. In another context, the proverb is also applied to a person who has started to despise people whose help he or she had earlier depended upon.

❖ 56 ❖

Kisaka kishiaa kiremwa.

Kichaka huwa chema kikilimwa.

Dense bush is good if it is cultivated.

A plot of 'dense bush' (*kisaka*) is useless until it has been cleared and cultivated (*Fig. 11*). Similarly, a broken bicycle or another thing may be abandoned by its owner as no longer being of use. But a broken thing can perhaps be repaired by a craftsman, and then it becomes 'good' again. The proverb functions as a warning not to throw away a broken thing because it may possibly be repaired or mended and then used again.

Persistence and thrift are valued by the Meru as human virtues, as a person usually is able to accumulate his or her wealth through them. Thrift, however, has its limits in the sense that it may change into greed that often is accompanied by envy and other negative feelings. The difference between thrift and greed is clearly seen in the Meru proverb tradition.



Fig. 11. In many places, dense bush and cultivated land or banana plantations battle each other (P 56).

Greed and envy

Greed and envy are common phenomena in any human society with economic differences between people and families. Some Meru proverbs take a stand in relation to these phenomena, as greed and envy are incompatible with the ideal of the good life.

❖ 57 ❖

Efo ndu amakyii imaa yuva ndi.

Hakuna mtu awezaye kumaliza mali zilizoko duniani.

No one can finish the riches of the world.

The Meru word *yuva* refers to everything that exists and thus, metaphorically, to the riches of the world. This interpretation and the corresponding translations are corroborated by the explanation given by the

informants: You may be rich or poor, but you have to leave everything behind when you die.

The proverb is applied to a greedy person who wants more and more wealth, but never can be satisfied. The proverb functions as a warning to such a person, because he or she will not find happiness in wealth but greed rather makes him or her unhappy. The proverb is also used as a consolation or comfort to other people who are not as rich. There is no need to be envious, because greed and wealth do not bring happiness and finally everybody has to give up all wealth. Death is a mighty equalizer.

People's greed often manifests itself in quarrels about inheritance. There is a Meru proverb related to such a situation.

❖ 58 ❖

Kukee are sha Aṛaṛunya ulya ateeshi vawo?

Ukoje kama Aṛaṛunya asiyewajua watu wake?

Are you like Aṛaṛunya who does not know his own people?

Aṛaṛunya is the name of a man who appears in the oral Meru tradition. *Aṛaṛunya* had got hold of a big inheritance but he was not willing to share it with his relatives who had a right to a part of the same inheritance. The proverb functions as a reminder or a warning to such a person to divide the inheritance according to the customary or the civil law.

Instead of greed and envy, one should be satisfied with what he or she has got.

❖ 59 ❖

Kyiware nkiware.

Kilichopatikana kimepatikana.

What you have got, you have got.

The proverb is addressed or applied to an envious person who likes to compare his or her possessions with the properties of other people. The proverb functions as a warning to such a person, because while envying

other people he or she may forget to take care of his or her own possessions. The proverb can apply to a poor as well as to a rich person.

Also the proverb 'The other person's teeth eat sand' in its secondary meaning (see P 91) is addressed to a person who is filled with envy at the property or the fortune of other people. What you have got, you have got. It is useless to envy one's neighbours their fortune because even if you could get the same it would perhaps not do you any good.

Lending and borrowing

To the Meru, taking care of one's property and thrift do not mean greed in the sense that a person should jealously protect his or her possessions from other people. On the contrary, there is an advanced institution of lending and borrowing in their society.

In addition to money, all kinds of things like tools and kitchen utensils are borrowed and lent. The principles of lending and borrowing are stated in many proverbs.

❖ 60 ❖

Nri wa sile ni itaa.

Dawa ya deni ni kulipa.

The medicine of a loan is to repay.

The Meru word *nri* means both a 'tree' and a 'medicine'. The reason for this probably is that some of the most common traditional herbal medicines are obtained from the bark, roots or leaves of trees (Harjula 1980). The proverb functions as a reminder to a person who has 'forgotten' to pay a debt or to return something he or she has borrowed. More generally, the proverb reminds people that if a person does not repay a debt, he or she will no longer get help.

❖ 61 ❖

Ndoongo ikuyyaa waasheny ndi.

Kitu hakizeeki kisikostahili.

A thing does not grow old in the wrong place.

The word *ndoongo* means a skin of a goat or a cow. In the proverb, the word is used as a metaphor for all kinds of things from a piece of rope to a cooking-pot or a saw. The word *waasheny* refers to a ‘wrong place’ in the sense that something is in a place it does not belong. This proverb, too, is used as a reminder to a person who has borrowed something and forgotten to return it to its owner. The proverb is also employed when a borrowed thing is returned earlier than was expected. In the latter case, the proverb just states a common ideal. If you borrow something you should return it as soon as possible.

In any case, if a person wants to borrow something from other people, he or she must approach them in a proper way.

❖ 62 ❖

Iiraswaa isikwa iriso.

Mshale ukipigwa jicho hufunikwa.

When an arrow is shot the eye is covered.

Blood or blood mixed with milk is a common drink among several East African ethnic groups like the Maasai who surround the Meru. The verb *irasa*, ‘to shoot an arrow’, refers to the Maasai custom of taking blood from a cow by incising a vein in its neck with an arrow. While this is being done, the cow’s eyes are covered in order to keep the animal calm. Otherwise the cow may become restive. The cow, not explicitly mentioned in the proverb, is a metaphor for a person who is tactfully approached with a request.

The proverb functions as advice to a person who intends to borrow something. More generally, the proverb suggests that if a person wants to get something from other people, be it an object or a service, he or she

must approach them in a proper way. Otherwise the request will be turned down.

Regardless of the borrower's method of approach, in certain situations any person has the right to refuse the request.

❖ 63 ❖

Ngitani yendee fireny ndi.

Mwana wa pekee haendi vitani.

The only son does not go to war.

The proverb is used in a situation where a person wants to borrow something the owner is not willing to lend because it is the only one of its kind he or she has (for example, an axe or a cooking-pot). The proverb functions as a culturally acceptable refusal to the request.

❖ 64 ❖

Numbe yanumbua kita ili kushaaria shisikya.

Ng'ombe alisema, kuliko kuniazima kwa mtu mwingine unichinje.

A cow said: Rather butcher me than lend me to another person.

This proverb also functions as a refusal when a person is not willing to lend something requested by a neighbour or a relative. The reason for the refusal is the fact that a person usually takes better care of his or her own property than that of somebody else.

The borrower may already be known in the community as a person who does not take much care of other people's property that has earlier been lent to him or her.

❖ 65 ❖

Kwareta nsikira kureka kyikamba.

Ukipoteza chenye thamani utakifidia.

If you lose a valuable thing you will redeem it.

Wealth, Property and the Good Life

In this proverb, the word *nsikira* means a valuable thing and *kyi-kamba* refers to something that is still more valuable. The proverb is used when a person has lost something that had been lent to him or her. In this case, the proverb just states a simple fact. If you have borrowed a knife that had already been used for years and lose it, you have to buy a new knife for the person who lent it to you. The proverb also functions as a warning used by the person who is lending something to you: Take good care of this thing! If you lose it, you will have to buy a new one for me!

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Persistence and some other aspects of the good life presented in this chapter are closely related to a person's industriousness which is also an important social value among the Meru. Nevertheless, in the Meru proverb tradition a person's industriousness seems to be connected more with work and life in general than with property. For this reason, the proverbs dealing with work and industriousness as elements of the good life will be analysed separately in the next chapter.

