

6. WORK AND INDUSTRIOUSNESS AS ELEMENTS OF THE GOOD LIFE

There was a young man who used to visit us once or twice a week. We usually gave him a cup of tea and bread, and spent an hour chatting with him. As months passed, however, we started to feel uncomfortable with his visits. We felt as if he was abusing our hospitality. He had never asked for any money, but one day he did it in a peculiar way.

‘*Mwalimu* (teacher), I had a dream last night’, he said and continued: ‘In the dream *Iruva* (God) himself told me that today *mwalimu* Harjula will give me 20 shillings, because I need to buy something.’ I was surprised and astonished at his trick. ‘I don’t think that I will give you any money, because *Iruva* has not said anything to me about this matter’, I replied, but that was of no help. The young man repeated his request and in no time we had a hot argument going on.

Fortunately, I remembered two Meru proverbs that immediately relaxed the tension. The first one was a warning not to misuse a person’s hospitality. ‘Buttocks kill friendship’ (P 50). The other one was related to a person’s own industriousness. ‘Buttocks don’t pick up dry leaves’ (see below). Since that day our relationship changed, and I never again had a feeling that he abused our friendship. A suitable proverb in the right situation speaks more than a thousand words!

The division between lazy and industrious people does not follow geographical boundaries. In practice, there are both lazy and industrious people in any society. Both laziness and industriousness are also dealt with in the Meru proverb tradition.

The value of work and industriousness in general

❖ **66** ❖

Kisiaa kwa rembo kiimboo imburu ndi.

Matako hayaokoti jani kavu.

Buttocks don't pick up dry leaves.

In this proverb again, buttocks refer to a lazy person who likes to spend most of the time just sitting and chatting (see P 50). A dry leaf is a metaphor for a small thing that has little value. The proverb functions as a warning to a lazy person who lacks even the barest necessities of life because of his or her laziness.

❖ **67** ❖

Lia koomba ombwa.

Kuliko kuomba uombwe wewe.

Better to be begged from than to beg.

This proverb, too, functions as a warning to a lazy person. More generally, it crystallizes the importance of work and industriousness as elements of the good life. The proverb is also related to the Meru ideas of property. It is better to work hard and gain something than to be lazy and have nothing.

❖ **68** ❖

Kimiri kya iketi ndeu.

Mafao ya mtumishi ni tumbo.

The profit of a servant is the stomach.

The Meru word *iketi* refers to a servant or an 'employee' who is not paid any actual salary but only gets daily meals (the 'stomach') in return

for his or her work. The word *kimiri* indicates that the food is rightfully due to such a person, something he or she has a right to expect and get. The function of the proverb is to remind an employer of this fact and also, if necessary, to warn. A servant or an 'employee' who is not given daily meals grows weak and can no longer serve the employer. The proverb is also used as a reminder of the value of work in general, thus having a similar function to that of the two previous proverbs.

Persistence and stamina

In an agricultural and cattle-keeping community like that of the Meru, there are many tasks that require not only industriousness, but also persistence and stamina because they are so difficult or time-consuming. It is no wonder that some Meru proverbs emphasize the importance of persistence and stamina in relation to work.

❖ 69 ❖

Ire inuru lyutwaa myingeny.

Jani bichi hutolewa penye miiba.

A new leaf sprouts among the thorns.

In the Meru area, there are several species of thorny shrubs and bushes without leaves during the dry season. When the rains come, within a few days' time new green leaves and beautiful flowers appear among the thorns on the branches (*Fig. 12*). In the proverb, a new leaf is a metaphor for something valuable. The thorns refer to the difficulties that often make the obtaining of a valuable thing so hard.

The proverb is applied to a person who is planning to clear a new field in a stony area with plenty of bushes, to build a new house, to marry a bride from a rich family, to find rare medicinal herbs or to obtain something else that is regarded as valuable. The proverb reminds such a person that in order to obtain this or that valuable thing he or she must



Fig. 12. Lungurushashe (Barleria mucronata Lindau), one of the common thorny shrubs in the Meru area (P 69). The leaves of the plant are used as a remedy for snakebite.

work hard and needs a lot of persistence. The proverb also urges a person to make a careful estimation of his or her skills and resources before starting a difficult task.

❖ 70 ❖

Shia shaasha na muu wayo.

Njia ndefu na uhai wake.

The long way and its life. (The long way brings life.)

In its basic meaning, the Meru word *muu* means 'life' as the opposite of *ufu*, 'death'. It is *muu* that makes a human alive. At death, *muu* leaves the person, and the body becomes a corpse (Harjula 1986: 90–91). *Muu* also means the stem of a banana plant. This probably is a derived meaning of 'life', as the stem is important food for cows giving them life.

This proverb, too, reminds people that if they want to get something valuable they must be ready for hard work. In a more narrow sense, the

proverb functions as a warning not to take a shortcut that is known to be dangerous because of robbers or wild animals.

❖ 71 ❖

Mawe eemaa numbe tinwaa mura ndi.

Mawe hayazuii ng'ombe wasinywe maji.

Stones don't hinder cows from drinking water.

The stones mentioned in the proverb are the stones that become visible in the rivers during the dry season. In spite of the stones, the cows keep coming to the river to drink water, however little there may be. In its basic meaning, the proverb is used in times when the dry season continues too long, and people may leave their fields uncultivated because they fear the lack of rain.

In such a situation, the proverb functions as a mutual encouragement to cultivate the fields, because a person can never predict the weather with absolute certainty. The proverb is used also in many other situations with a similar function. Don't give up! Even if there are difficulties, just go on with your work!

The quality of work

Industriousness, persistence and stamina are not the only prerequisites that make work an important element of the good life. There may be plenty of work eagerly done, but with poor results. In addition to quantity, quality is also needed.

❖ 72 ❖

Numba ya mfu ivaa iremia ndi.

Nyumba iliyoko katika njia ya maji haifai kuikinga.

**There is no use in protecting a house that
has been built in the path of water.**

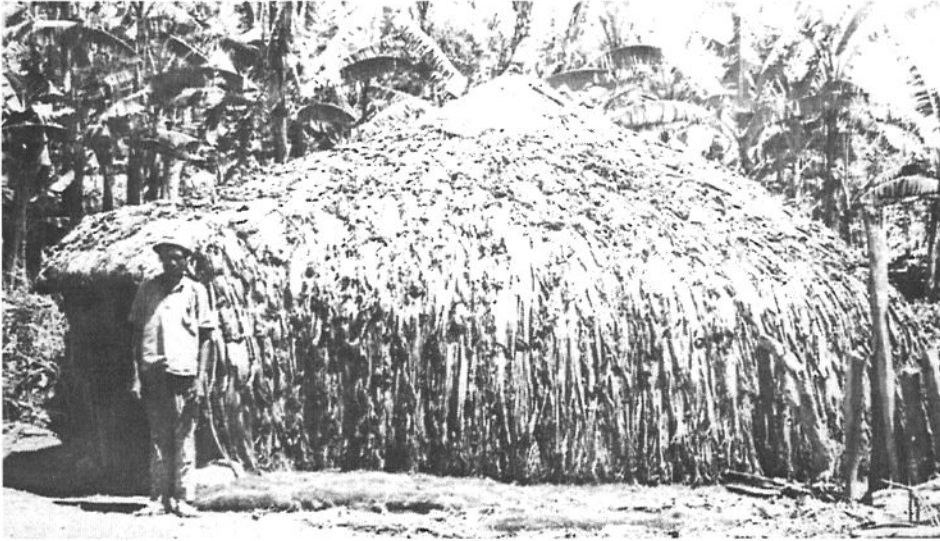


Fig. 13. The traditional Meru house is covered with strips from the stem of banana plants (P 72).

During the rainy season, water is slowly stored in the riverbeds on the higher slopes of Mt. Meru. Finally, after weeks or months of rain, the riverbeds and waterpools can no longer hold the water. The heavy masses of water start thundering down along the slopes of the mountain and the *Engare Nanyuki* and other rivers often flood. Sometimes the flood water carries away houses (*Fig. 13*), animals, cars and even people.

If a house has originally been built in a wrong place, in the path of the water, there is very little to be done if a big flood begins. The function of the proverb is to remind people that it is vital to be careful from the beginning in starting a new thing, because afterwards it may be impossible to make it any better. In a more general sense, the proverb just states a fact of life. There are things that have some kind of an original fault and can no longer be repaired or saved.

❖ 73 ❖

Numba shiporu mboshi yyo shaangu ya yaakwa ni ifisi.

Kwa fisi ni rahisi kuingia nyumba ambayo nguzo zake zimeoza.

A house with rotten poles is easily entered by a hyena.

In Meru house-building, the term *mboshi* means the poles forming the sides of a hut and supporting the roof. The hyena is a metaphor for danger or trouble. The proverb functions as a reminder to people to do things carefully, for example, to build a house and to choose the building materials, or to clear a new field in the proper way. Otherwise a person will soon find himself or herself in trouble.

Self-reliance and cooperation

Self-reliance is an important social value among the Meru. Young people, adults and elderly people are expected to take care of many everyday tasks themselves (P 106, 108 and 113). On the other hand, there is plenty of work to be done that a person cannot manage alone. Cooperation, compatible with their idea of living together, thus becomes an element of the Meru ideal of a good life. It depends on the task and the situation which way should be taken, self-reliance or cooperation (*Fig. 14*).

❖ 74 ❖

Kyimamaa kyimwi kyireraa sha vivili ndi.

Chuma kimoja cha kuvaa mkononi hakitoi mlio kama vivili.

One iron arm-ring does not speak as two of them do.

The Meru word *kyimamaa* means an iron ring in general, and also an iron arm-ring the Meru wear as an ornament. In the proverb, the iron arm-ring is a metaphor for work that should be done. The proverb is used, for example, by a person who has been asked to help in a task he or she regards as so easy that no help is needed. In this situation, the proverb func-



Fig. 14. Roofs of houses and storehouses are usually made and repaired in cooperation with neighbours (P 76).

tions as a socially acceptable refusal of help. More generally, the proverb states that there are tasks that require only one person and tasks that need more people.

❖ 75 ❖

Kwatiyywa vandu pateny, kuwaraa kitami na urende lwafo.

Ukiachwa na watu mbugani, utashika ulindi kwa mguu wako.

**If you are left alone in the steppe, you must hold down
the female firestick with your own foot.**

Normally, two persons are needed to produce fire with firesticks. One person holds the 'female firestick' (*kitami*) firmly on the ground. The other one twirls the male stick between the palms of the hands, the point turning in a hole of the female stick with some tinder around it. If there is just one person, like a shepherd tending his goats, he must hold down the female firestick with his own foot.

The proverb is applied to a person who would like to have some help but has been left alone. The proverb functions as an encouragement to such a person to rely on himself or herself. In such a situation, a person may apply the proverb also to himself or herself.

❖ 76 ❖

Uko lumwi luutaa nda nreweny ndy.

Mkono mmoja hautoi chawa kichwani.

One hand does not rid the head of lice.

On the other hand, there are situations where a person cannot be self-reliant and manage alone. For this kind of situation, getting rid of lice offers a readily understood metaphor, as you do need two hands or often even two persons for that. The proverb is used by a person who requests or offers help in a difficult task like removing a big stone from a field. The proverb functions as a socially acceptable request or offer of help.

In a more specific meaning, the proverb is used as an explanation of a household's poverty or poor living conditions. A family is well only if the husband, the wife and the children all take care of their responsibilities.

Prompt action and dawdling

In this chapter, various aspects of work and industriousness have been discussed as elements of the good life. There is still one more thing the Meru proverb tradition emphasizes in relation to work, namely prompt action as the opposite of dawdling.

❖ 77 ❖

Mwana, ekalolio kyi sha kyaara kyilya kya kwa Kulole kyarekyia Ntue?

Mtoto, unashangaaje kama ile shoka ya Kulole iliyopotelea Ntue?

Child, are you standing and staring like the axe of Kulole that was lost in Ntue?

According to a Meru story, *Kulole* had an axe that was completely useless. Its edge was blunt and handle broken. Everybody despised the axe because it could not be used in chopping wood. One day *Kulole* lost his axe somewhere in Ntue, an area between Poli and Nkoaranga.

The verb *ikalolia* means to be astonished in the sense of standing and staring around in a stupid way. The lost axe of *Kulole* is a metaphor for a person, a child or an adult, who is slow to start working and just stands and stares around while other people are already busy at work. The proverb functions as a rebuke to such a person.

❖ 78 ❖

Unrushu kwallembwa iluriita lukee ukoo lukankua lukyivaa iriita nndi.

Ukishindwa kufyeka vichaka vya miiba vikiwa vichanga,
vikiisha kuzeeka haifai kuvifyeka.

**If you don't cut a thorny bush while it is still young,
it is useless to cut it when it has grown old.**

Unrushu is the Meru name for *Caesalpinia decapetala* (Roth) Alston. This thorny bush is commonly planted as a hedge around the fields in order to keep animals and people out (Harjula 1980: 43). As a hedge, the bush needs to be regularly cut, otherwise it will grow wild and will no longer function as a proper barrier.

The proverb is used in a context where someone wants to postpone a necessary job. The proverb functions as a reminder or a warning to such a person. Everything should be done at the proper time lest it become too difficult or impossible.

❖ 79 ❖

Yasinda nreminy yatevesa umuye.

Kichelewacho shambani hungojsha utamu.

Lateness in planting delays the sweetness.

This proverb, too, is used in a context where a person is dawdling and inclined to postpone necessary work. The proverb is also applied in a situation where people want to postpone a common project, for example, of together clearing stones from the fields of a neighbour. The proverb reminds people that a delay in starting work means a delay of 'harvest', too. Only prompt action yields results.

❖ 80 ❖

Mwana wa llifu anumbua: 'Siku ivili mmwaka.'

Mtoto wa shangazi alisema: 'Siku mbili ni mwaka.'

The aunt's child said: 'Two days is a year.'

In this proverb, a small child speaks a wise truth about the good life. A person or a family often benefits a long time from work that required only a couple of days to be completed. The proverb reminds people not to postpone such work but to think of its lasting benefit and act promptly.

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One of the proverbs (P 69) analysed in this chapter urges a person to make a careful estimation of his or her resources and skills before starting a demanding task. Otherwise the person may not be able to finish the work, or he or she may spoil the whole thing in another way. The proverb calls for realism and a sense of proportion which is the theme of the next chapter.

