

9. OLD AGE AS THE CLIMAX OF THE GOOD LIFE

In Western thought, the human life is often perceived as a 'life-span' rising from birth and childhood through youth to the prime of life of mature adulthood, and then descending to old age and death. In the Meru world-view, the image of 'life-span' is hardly feasible. The best way to interpret the corresponding Meru idea of human life as a whole is to speak of a 'life-line', a straight line which rises from birth to death. In order to illustrate this, one can apply Placide Tempels' classic theory of Bantu ontology and the hierarchy of forces (1959).

In the Meru world-view, the concept of *finya* corresponds to the 'vital force' of Tempels' theory. In the ontological hierarchy of forces, God is at the top because he is *Muni finya*, 'He who has the power'. Below him are the 'living dead' (see p. 102), people, animals, plants and, at the bottom of the hierarchy, rocks, sand and minerals (Harjula 1986: 75–77).

The Meru ethnomedicinal tradition recognises an illness called *itura finya*, 'lack of strength' (Harjula 1980: 126–132). The most common symptoms of the illness are physical weakness, fatigue, pains in different parts of the body, fits of shivering and other ailments. The large number of cures and remedies for 'lack of strength' indicates the importance attached to *finya* in everyday life.

A person's *finya* does not consist of his or her physical strength and vitality only. *Finya* includes a person's power of mind, skills, wisdom and experience of life, too (*Fig. 23*). Old age is the climax of a person's 'life-line' because old people have more *finya* than younger people. This is why old people are commonly respected among the Meru (Harjula 1995: 151, 155). In addition, old people often have special knowledge of history, riddles, proverbs, ethnomedicine, childbirth, and so on.

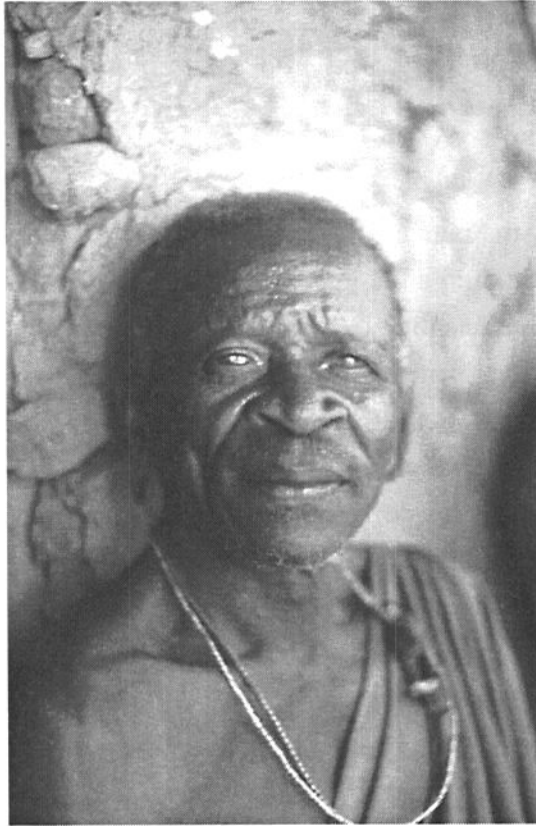


Fig. 23. Wisdom and experience of life, written on the face of an elderly man.

The idea of old people's *finya* and the respect for them are not based on a mere philosophical understanding of human life. Most of the old people I have met among the Meru have really been mentally sharp, with plenty of wisdom and experience of life. In Northern Tanzania, the infant and child death rate has been relatively high, and the life expectancy somewhere around 50 years. In practice, this means that only the strongest and healthiest people have survived until their sixties and over.

Old age, experience and wisdom

❖ 110 ❖

Nri ukaangara maru, kutanumbwe wamuuma!

Mti ukipukutisha majani, usiseme umekauka!

If a tree drops its leaves, don't say it has dried up!

During the dry season, a tree may drop all its leaves and remain in this state for months. People may think that the tree is completely dead and want to cut it down for firewood. Nevertheless, such a tree may well be alive and suddenly start sprouting, put out new leaves and branches, and again offer pleasant shade for a passer-by.

In the proverb, the dead looking tree is a metaphor for an old person who seems to have lost his or her *finya* and become a useless being. The proverb functions as a warning against rating or judging such a person according to his or her appearance and old age. More generally, the proverb reminds people that the worn-out body of an old person can hold a strong and sharp spirit.

❖ 111 ❖

Nkova ukee wooro uturaa kindo ufingaa ndi.

Kamba iliyoko nje haikosi kitu cha kufunga.

A rope that lies outdoors does not lack something to bind.

In a Meru village, one often sees a bundle of rope hanging in a tree outside a house or lying on the ground near the door. To a casual passer-by, such a rope may seem useless and forgotten. In fact, the rope will soon be needed for tying a restless cow or a goat, fastening a bundle of firewood, for a temporary repair or for some other purpose.

In the proverb, the rope is a metaphor for an old person whose favourite place usually is outside the house in the shadow of a tree. He or she also may look useless and forgotten but this is not so at all. The person may seem to sleep but probably he or she is observing people, keeping watch for the house. Suddenly he or she is surrounded by children and a lively hum of voices can be heard. Or a person comes to talk and ask for advice in a difficult matter.

The proverb is applied to an unthinking child or another person who laughs at old people or despises them as lazy and useless beings. The proverb reminds people that because of their experience of life and other dimensions of *finya*, old people are needed and helpful in many situations. In general, the proverb functions as a means of education for children and youth in their relationship to old people.

Elderly people are respected especially because of their wisdom and experience, and younger people turn to them for advice in many difficult matters of everyday life. The idea of old age and wisdom going together is crystallized by the following proverb:

❖ 112 ❖

Nriko nkuu woovio nnungu ndi.

Mwiko wa zamani haudanganywi na chungu.

An old spoon cannot be cheated by the cooking-pot.

An old spoon has been used for years and it has plenty of 'experience' with the cooking-pot. In the proverb, the spoon is a metaphor for an old, experienced person. The proverb is used in a situation where a younger person has tried to cheat an older one and failed. In another context, the metaphorical cooking-pot can refer to confusing circumstances which would have fooled a younger person. The proverb functions as an explanation for the ability of old people to cope with difficult situations. Experience and wisdom go with old age. An old person may proudly apply the proverb also to himself or herself.

Responsibilities of old people

In spite of their age, old people also have their normal responsibilities. They are expected to be self-reliant, at least occasionally, and to behave according to their age.

❖ 113 ❖

Nkyeku wa ifie akuutia nri muni.

Mama mzee wa nyani hujitibu kwa dawa mwenyewe.

An old baboon mother applies medicine by herself.

Old baboons sometimes have nobody to remove flies and ticks from their skin so they have to manage this by themselves. In the proverb, the image of an old baboon mother refers to an old person who occasionally has to rely on himself or herself because there are no helpers available. The proverb encourages such a person, for example, in collecting firewood, bringing water or tending a sick animal. The person may apply the proverb to himself or herself, too. Often the proverb also simply states a fact of life, something the neighbours or other people have observed. In any case, the ideal of self-reliance (P 106–108) is relevant even in old age.

❖ 114 ❖

Kukee are sha nkyeku wa kinamashushi atang' inaa?

Ukoje kama mama mzee wa chozi asiyekua?

Are you like an old sunbird mother who has not grown up?

Sunbirds (*Fig. 24*) are multicoloured birds that feed on a mixed diet of nectar and insects. They especially like to suck the sweet sap of banana plant flowers. A sunbird is often seen fluttering around and above a flower like a butterfly. In Swahili, the bird is called *chozi* or *mlaasali*, the latter name meaning 'honey-eater' (Archbold 1966: 18–20; Maimu: 1982: 21).



Fig. 24. A Sunbird. Many metaphors are taken from the rich fauna of the Meru area (P 114).

In the proverb, the old sunbird mother is a metaphor for an old person or an adult who behaves in a childish way according to the Meru code of behaviour. The image of a sunbird gives a readily understood idea of, for example, an old aunt who moves around and giggles like a school-girl. The proverb functions as a humorous reminder or advice to such a person to behave according to his or her age.

Old age, ailments and death

It is important to note that, at least on the basis of my research on the Meru, they do not regard old age as a special reason for 'lack of strength' (*itura finya*) or other illnesses. This may be due to the fact that only the healthiest people have reached an old age. In the ethnomedicinal repertoire of Mirau, a famous Meru healer, old age appears only once as an aetiological explanation, namely in connection with pains (*mavavio*) in different parts of the body (Harjula 1980: 84).

On the other hand, one can reasonably suppose that old age naturally brings its ailments. In this respect, it would be interesting to study the medicinal records of the *Nkoaranga* hospital in the Meru area. As far as the proverbs collected for this study are concerned, there is only one proverb referring to an 'ailment' in connection with a person's growing older.

❖ 115 ❖

Mimia shisha iraa wari ndi.

Mbege zilizoota vizuri hazina pombe safi.

Overly ripe grain does not give good beer.

In the proverb, the adjectival attribute *shisha*, 'good' or 'well', means 'overly ripe'. *Wari* is the name for local beer and has the connotation of 'good beer' or 'proper beer'. The metaphor of overly ripe grain refers to a woman who is regarded as too old to have children. 'Good beer' is a metaphor for a healthy baby. The proverb is applied to a situation where an older woman has given birth to an ill or weak baby. The proverb reminds people that older women should not bear offspring because their children will not be strong and healthy.

This proverb does not add anything new to what was already said about the absence of special illnesses of old age in the traditional Meru understanding of health and illness. The proverb refers to older age as a natural reason for giving birth to a weak baby, not as an illness. In addition, the proverb does not speak of old age or old people but of a woman who has passed the best years of her fertility.

Only one of the proverbs collected for this study refers to old age and death. The proverb reflects a natural and realistic attitude towards death.

❖ 116 ❖

Miri myumu iwee na mishu.

Miti mikavu huanguka na mibichi pia.

Dry trees fall and green ones as well.

Again the metaphor of a dry tree (P 110) refers to an old person. The way the proverb is constructed indicates that it is natural for an old person to die and so it is for a younger one, too. The proverb simply states a reality of life in a situation where a youth or a child has died. Death does not depend on one's age. The Meru have often seen babies dying.

According to the Meru concept of 'human' (Harjula 1986: 90–91), a person is an integrated entity. The body (*vvili*) with its members and organs is made alive by 'life' (*muu*) which overlaps with 'vital force' (*finya*). A person's 'soul' or 'ego' (*nrima*) gives him or her the characteristic identity and makes him or her exactly that person he or she is. The Meru say that they can see in a person's face whether he or she has a good or a bad *nrima*, that is, whether he or she is a good or a bad person.

At death (*ufu*), the entity of a living human person disintegrates. 'Life' leaves the body which now becomes a corpse (*nnying'a*). A person's 'soul' or 'ego' changes into a 'living dead' (*irimu*, pl. *varumu*) keeping the living person's characteristics. So the wise grandfather can be consulted through dreams even after his death, and an irritable and frightening old person is equally frightening after his or her death.

A Meru family, clan and the whole community consist of the living (*vanndu*) and the dead (*varumu*). People are believed to continue their personal existence as 'living dead' as long as their graves are visited and they are remembered by name. After 2–4 generations they are no longer remembered, and believed to have no influence upon the lives of the living people. Only remarkable persons like chiefs and healers remain among the 'living dead' from generation to generation.

* * *

Old Age as the Climax of the Good Life

Old age being such an important phase in human life it may seem strange that there are so few Meru proverbs concerning elderly people, but perhaps this applies to my relatively small collection only. On the other hand, in the classic collection of Shambaa proverbs by Johanssen and Döring (1915), out of the total number of 600 proverbs, only thirteen deal with old age and death. Be that as it may, the Meru proverbs analysed in this chapter corroborate my observations on Meru life and culture: To the Meru, old age is the ideal climax of the good life and human life in general.

Elderly people are respected because they in many ways have more *finya* than the younger. Because of their experience and wisdom they are consulted on different matters. Old people have a close relationship with their grandchildren and often with other children also. Old people are needed and kept in the middle of a family's and a clan's life as long as possible. No wonder that most of the old Meru people I have met have given the impression that they are content with their life.

In the last instance, however, it is not the old age nor wisdom or any other human skill that guarantees a person the good life. In the Meru world-view, the final source of the good life is found at the top of the hierarchy of forces. It is God, the Giver of gifts (*Mamwavi*), who grants a human the good life.

