

11. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study has been to analyse a collection of Meru proverbs in order to understand and to describe the ideal of the good life as presented by these proverbs. The study concentrates on different dimensions and elements of the good life and its prerequisites and obstacles. The aim of the analysis of proverbs was to understand their meaning or message. It was suggested in the Introduction (p. 1, 10) that the Meru ideal of the good life can be constructed from the messages of the proverbs. Before summarizing the results of the analysis, certain methodological questions relevant to the reliability of the study should be discussed.

Questions on the reliability of the study

Because the analysis of Meru proverbs concentrates on their meanings, the reliability of the whole study depends on the authenticity of interpreting the proverbs. To what extent and how may the ‘otherness’ (Honko 1992; Suojanen 1995) of Meru culture have influenced my interpretations of the proverbs? What about the Swahili and English translations of the Meru proverbs? Have the translations perhaps changed their original meanings? Have some other aspects relevant to the meaning of proverbs been omitted in this study?

Since my first Meru study, I have been aware of the twin dangers of ‘reading-in’ into the primary research material one’s own ideas, and then ‘reading-out’ from the material the ideas as important findings (Harjula 1969: 32). In analysing the Meru proverbs, I have tried to avoid these dangers by letting the material speak for itself as much as possible. It was suggested in the Introduction (p. 5) that, in order to understand the meaning of a proverbial text, the context of use and the function of the proverb

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should be known. The analysis has corroborated the validity of this principle. I fully subscribe to what A. T. Dalfovo (1991: 58) states in his study on Lugbara proverbs: 'The full appraisal of a proverb can only be acquired in the living context of the life and culture in which it is used.'

Another question relevant to the reliability of this study concerns translation, especially the English translations of the Meru proverbs. Recently, R. E. S. Tanner (1993) has reminded students of African cultures that translation is interpretation, and as such translations may change original meanings. In this respect, however, there were no insurmountable difficulties with the Meru proverbs. The leading principle was to formulate the translations as literally as possible and not to try to make the meaning of a proverb more understandable through 'free' or 'equivalent' translation. A good example here is P 97 'That which is behind looks at itself' (and not 'The future takes care of itself').

Instead of trying to formulate 'equivalent' English translations, the details of the proverbial texts relevant to the understanding of their meaning have been explained whenever needed, using the means of contextual interpretation. In the analysis of Meru proverbs, 'context' does not refer to their context of use only but also to the environmental and socio-cultural contexts of proverbs as well as to their context in oral tradition (Introduction, pp. 5-8).

Still another question relevant to the authenticity of the meanings of proverbs as described in this study concerns the relation of 'meaning' to feeling and body-language. If the emotions and the body-language of the informants had been observed during the collecting of the proverbs, would it have added something essential to the meanings of the proverbs?

The question of feeling, body-language and meaning is not a new one in folkloristics, anthropology or psychology. Many researchers, such as M. Perkins (1972), M. Argyle (1975) and more recently N. Besnier (1990), U. Wikan (1992) and J. Leavitt (1996) have dealt with different aspects of the question. There are scientific anthologies on the topic, too,

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such as those edited by J. Benthall & T. Polhemus (1972) and M. Moerman & M. Nomura (1990).

When the proverbs were collected, no special attention was given to the emotions and the body-language of the informants. In fact, this would have been impossible. In order to collect material on emotions and body-language, a researcher should be able to record both visual and audio material in concrete 'natural' situations. This was technically not possible during my fieldwork. In general, anthropologists and folklorists are well aware of these and other similar problems of documentation in fieldwork (for example, Bar-Itzhak & Shenhar (1992).

Furthermore, in order to be able to interpret his or her observations, the researcher should have special skills in the 'anthropology of emotions' (Leavitt 1996). I have no expertise within this branch of anthropology. Nevertheless, having heard and seen the Meru use their proverbs in concrete situations, I have the general impression that body-language and emotions occasionally give a proverb a special emphasis or nuance but they do not add anything essential to its basic meaning (for example, P 10 and P 51).

Altogether, in spite of the critical questions discussed above, it can be estimated that the instrumental definition of 'meaning' given in the Introduction (p. 10) and the analysis of the Meru proverbs have been adequate for the purposes of this study. On the basis of analysis, it has been possible to get authentic information about the Meru ideal of the good life.

Living together in solidarity and social harmony

It was suggested in the Introduction (p. 1) that, generally speaking, most proverbs can be regarded as 'rules of the game' of human life. Already at the beginning of the analysis of Meru proverbs (Chapter 2), it became obvious that this general point of departure needs elaboration. The Meru concept of a human or a person (*nndu*) is strongly relational. A person

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finds his or her meaningful existence as a member of the community only. To the Meru, the good life basically means living together, and the proverbs about the good life become rules of community living.

The Meru live in a close-knit community, among and surrounded by people. Solidarity and mutual help are important values and elements of the common good life emphasized by a number of Meru proverbs. As members of the community, people have the right not only to expect but also to request help from other people. Solidarity, however, does not mean the equality of all people. As far as sympathy, mutual help and solidarity are concerned, relatives are more important than other people.

According to the Meru ideal of the good life, living close together should not be suppressive. Their proverbs remind people that there should be room for different individuals and families to live their own lives. Some proverbs clearly warn people about setting tight moral principles for other people or meddling in their business in other ways. Social harmony of different people living close together is the basic element of the Meru ideal of the good life.

Living close together easily creates situations where the good life becomes endangered. In this respect, too, Meru proverbs are experiential and realistic. One of the basic dangers to social harmony is the hidden human selfishness, pretending friendly interest in other people's needs and life just for one's own personal benefit. A number of Meru proverbs are straightforward warnings to such a person that his or her selfish intentions are known. A person with selfish intentions often also gets hurt himself or herself, adding to his or her bitterness and becoming even more dangerous to other people and social harmony.

As a number of the proverbs state, the close-knit Meru community is transparent in many ways. In addition to a person's selfish intentions, all kinds of things from friendship to quarrels, from love and affection to theft and other criminal actions soon become known. In living close together, it is difficult and often even impossible to hide anything. In a way,

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the transparency of common living safeguards the principles of the good life. One thing that may remain unnoticed is the activity of a sorcerer.

Living close together, people do not only see and 'read' each other's outward way of life, but they also learn to know each other as different human beings. A person's nature is revealed by what is seen in his or her life. In this respect, the transparency of community life has given the Meru a realistic attitude towards people and human life in general. There are all kinds of people, and even a good person is not flawless.

In the midst of the endlessly varied human life, solidarity and social harmony remain basic ideals of the common good life. These collectivistic dimensions are always present in the good life. In principle, most of the proverbs of this study could have been analysed under the heading of Chapter 2 (Collectivistic dimensions of the good life). Nevertheless, there are certain aspects of the Meru ideal of the good life so important that they were worthy of a chapter of their own.

Constructive use of words

In the Meru ideal of the good life, human speech and words have special importance (Chapter 3). As a vital means of communication, speech and words nurture human relationships or break them down. A person can use his or her words for the benefit of other people or to harm them. The spoken words are accompanied by the power (*finya*) of the speaker, being an extension of his or her personality. A number of Meru proverbs remind people of their responsibility for the proper use of words as a prerequisite of the good life.

First of all, constructive speech is thoughtful speech. The more words there are, the more opportunities there are to misuse one's tongue for destructive speech which is warned about by many proverbs. A person's habit of speaking too much is often accompanied by use of indecent language and insulting words that show a lack of consideration towards other

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people. Expressing one's ideas without careful thought easily leads a person to give empty promises or to present unreasonable accusations towards or about other people. Ridiculing other people and boasting are other forms of the inappropriate use of words that causes troubles in human relationships and thus become harmful to the well-being of the whole community. A person who misuses words often harms himself or herself, too.

Altogether, within the Meru socio-cultural context, the constructive use of words means to use considered, genuine and true words. In the last instance, words themselves become constructive because there is power in them. Constructive words come from the 'good heart' of a person with a 'good tongue' (*ulumi usha*) and build up and nurture the common good life. In this respect, many kinds of words can become constructive from the usual exchange of greetings to special encouragement, from blessings and words of comfort to a severe warning.

Hospitality and generosity

Constructive words alone do not suffice for building up and nurturing the good life. There is a material dimension in the good life, too. In the Meru community, hospitality and generosity are important social values and elements of the common good life. For example, a common meal or a cup of tea is not only a symbol of a good relationship but, ideally, eating and talking together strengthens the solidarity and social harmony of the participants (Chapter 4).

In the Meru community, hospitality is a practical dimension of generosity and an open attitude to other people. In practice, generosity and hospitality mean sharing, mutual giving and taking.

In addition to food, drink and talk, this sharing has a spiritual dimension also, pointed out by some of the proverbs: A guest influences the lives of the host and his or her family, and vice versa.

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This is why outward hospitality as such does not guarantee the good life. A visit may bring a blessing or bad luck to the host and the guest. This, again, depends on the 'heart' and the 'tongue' of the people. A 'good guest' (*mwiini nsha*) is expected and always welcomed 'through the big door'.

In the Meru ideal of the good life, sharing must be accompanied by tactfulness. One should be very considerate about getting involved in other people's lives lest he or she should cause more harm than good. Some proverbs warn about the dangers of extravagance in showing generosity and misuse of other people's hospitality. Extravagance in generosity is no longer a value but rather stupidity. A person who misuses other people's benevolence is selfish and greedy and soon becomes a nuisance to everybody. Sharing, generosity and hospitality must be accompanied by a sense of proportion, too.

Property, thrift and persistence

In the light of Meru proverbs, wealth and property are important elements of the good life but not a guarantee of it. This is understandable because wealth and material well-being always remain relative. The proverbs do not emphasize the significance of wealth as such but rather remind people of a right attitude to property (Chapter 5).

In relation to wealth and property, persistence and thrift are vital prerequisites for the good life. Several proverbs warn people about despising a small beginning or throwing away anything that seems worthless at the moment. A person cannot get anything big and valuable without beginning with something little and humble. A useless thing may one day be needed again and a broken thing perhaps be repaired.

Meru proverbs make a clear distinction between thrift and greed. Persistence and thrift are valued by the Meru as human virtues because they build up the good life. Greed and envy, for their part, are incompatible

with the ideal of the good life. A greedy person can never be satisfied and finally, at death, everybody has to give up all wealth.

Thrift and taking good care of one's possessions do not mean that a person should greedily protect his or her property from other people. There is an advanced institution of lending and borrowing actively used in the Meru community. The basic principles of the institution are stated in Meru proverbs: If a person borrows something he or she must return it as soon as possible, lest the person no longer get help. If the borrowed thing is lost or broken a new thing must be bought as a replacement for it. In addition, some proverbs function as an acceptable refusal to a request for a loan.

Work and industriousness

Work is closely related to material well-being and thus a vital prerequisite for the good life. In this connection, 'work' does not mean just any kind of working. In addition to emphasizing the importance of industriousness in general, Meru proverbs mention other conditions also that make work meaningful (Chapter 6).

In an agricultural and cattle-keeping community like that of the Meru, many things must be done at the proper time. Prompt action as the opposite of dawdling thus becomes important. In addition, many tasks in the everyday Meru life require persistence and stamina, too. Meru proverbs underline the fact that if people want to get something valuable they must be ready for hard work. In addition to quantity, quality is also needed. Some proverbs remind people that it is vital to do things carefully, because a fault may be difficult to repair afterwards.

In the Meru community, self-reliance is an important social value. Young people, adults and even elderly people are expected to take care of many things themselves. Nevertheless, some tasks are so demanding that a

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person cannot manage them alone. Cooperation thus becomes an element of the good life as a natural thing in living together.

Realism and a sense of proportion

The importance of having a sense of proportion is implied in connection with many Meru proverbs like those related to boasting, extravagance, greed and envy, and work. In the analysis of the proverbs, the topic is touched upon in several places. Nevertheless, there are so many other proverbs directly emphasizing the importance of realism and a sense of proportion as elements of the good life that the topic required a chapter of its own (Chapter 7).

The lack of people's sense of proportion is often manifested as an overestimation of their own skills and position, warned about by some proverbs. If a person tries to accomplish something that is beyond his or her skills or to do too many things at the same time the person will just harm himself or herself. Overestimating one's importance often results in showing off in 'borrowed plumes', too. Such a person boasts of the results of other people's work as his or her own or makes himself or herself important by referring to influential people as close friends.

The other side of a person's overestimation of his or her own skills and position is the underestimation of other people and arrogance towards them. This kind of a lack of realism also endangers the good life. It makes a person, for example, belittle his or her enemies or approach other people with inappropriate requests. Such a person will soon find himself or herself in trouble.

Some proverbs emphasize the meaning of calmness and caution as elements of the good life. Calmness and caution are also dimensions of a person's sense of proportion and realistic attitude towards life. For example, one should not panic in a difficult situation because a rushed action may put the person in a still worse situation. In general, caution and even a

reasonable timidity protect a person and his or her life. They also give better results than hasty action or foolhardy courage.

Altogether, a person with a sense of proportion knows his or her own skills and position, abilities and resources, strengths and weaknesses, and lives and acts accordingly. Such a person also concentrates upon today's responsibilities without fear of the future because the future 'behind' will resolve itself.

The good life and children

Meru proverbs approach the question of children and the good life from two points of view, from that of the parents and other adults and that of the children themselves (Chapter 8).

In general, the birth of every healthy child is a joyful event. The value and importance of children is based on several things. Children help their mother and father in various everyday tasks. When the parents reach old age, children are expected to take care of them. And finally, children visit their parents' graves, traditionally bringing there food and drink.

On the other hand, children are not treated as little adults but are allowed to be children with their play and often noisy games as a part of their good life. When boys and girls reach a certain age they start feeling attraction towards each other, and they should have a right to this, too. Meru proverbs advise parents and other adults to take a positive approach to children's play and young love.

According to the Meru ideal of the good life, the proper upbringing of children is important for both the family itself and the future life of the children. In relation to this, respect for older people, obedience and self-reliance are the most important values emphasized by Meru proverbs and taught to a child or a young person. Self-reliance in everyday tasks and responsibilities has been emphasized in the upbringing of boys in particular.

Old age as the prime of life

In the Meru world-view, human life is perceived as a 'life-line', as a line which rises from birth to death. In order to illustrate this, it was possible to apply Placide Tempels' classic theory of the Bantu hierarchy of forces. The Meru concept of *finya* corresponds to the 'vital force' of Tempels' theory. The more *finya* a person has got, the higher he or she is in the ontological hierarchy of forces.

A person's *finya* does not consist of vitality and physical strength only, but it also includes his or her power of mind, wisdom, skills and experience of life. In this sense, old persons have more *finya* than younger people, and they have reached the climax of the human 'life-line'. This is why the Meru regard old age as the prime of the good life and human life in general (Chapter 9).

Old people are respected because of their *finya*, especially because of their wisdom and experience. In addition, they often have special knowledge of history, ethnomedicine, childbirth, and so on. Younger people turn to them for advice in different matters of everyday life. Meru proverbs remind people that the worn-out body of an old person can hold a sharp and strong spirit.

In the Meru community, old people are needed and kept in the middle of their family's and clan's life as long as possible. In spite of age, they also have their normal responsibilities, as some of the proverbs mention. They are expected to be self-reliant in many everyday tasks, and to behave according to their age.

God as the Giver of the good life

In relation to the good life, *Iřuva* is mentioned in Meru proverbs in His different roles. Most often God appears in proverbs in the role of the ‘Giver of gifts’ (*Mamwavi*). God with His ‘horn of plenty’ is rich and He provides everything. The gentle sunshine after months of heavy rains or the rain after a too long dry season, a good harvest, health, a newly born baby, everyday food and other good things are regarded as gifts from *Iřuva* (Chapter 10).

Correspondingly, Meru proverbs warn people both about boasting of one’s well-being and despising food or any other gifts of God. Human power and a person’s high position always have their limits; only *Iřuva* is permanent and endless. Arrogance and boasting do not build up the common good life.

Two of the proverbs that mention *Iřuva* function as means of accommodation in a difficult situation and help people to adjust themselves by means of their belief in God. In these proverbs, God is appealed to or referred to as ‘Helper’ (*Mweleka*), ‘Protector’ (*Makenge, Makinge*) or ‘Judge’ (*Mwumisia*) who knows everything.

In the light of the Meru proverbs analysed in this study, a person is responsible for his or her own decisions, actions and life in general. People have to do their best in order to achieve the good life. In the last instance, however, all that is good comes from *Iřuva*, from ‘He who has the power’ (*Muni finya*), and who is at the top of the hierarchy of forces. Both of these principles are emphasized by Meru proverbs.

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Fig. 25. A mortar is used for grinding corn and coffee beans.

Last but not least, one thing especially is needed for the good life as it is crystallized in the Meru proverbs analysed in this study. It is wisdom, or more precisely, practical wisdom, that most of the proverbs in this study deal with in different ways. So what would be more appropriate than to end the study with some proverbs which emphasize and praise the value of wisdom, the secret of the good life.

❖ 124 ❖

Itondo na kwalirwaa kyuuriny limanyaa ndi.

Mjinga haelewi, hata ukimweka katika kinu.

**A stupid person does not understand,
even if you put him (her) into a mortar. (Fig. 25)**

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❖ 125 ❖

Kita ili kung'inio ndeu ng'inio ni nrwe!

Kuliko kuzidiwa na tumbo uzidiwe na kichwa!

**Instead of being put in difficulties by the stomach,
be led by the head!**

(Let wisdom and not drinking lead your life!)

❖ 126 ❖

Ibengyele linua lingyi ndi.

Kisu kibovu hakinoi kingine.

Bad knives do not sharpen each other.

❖ 127 ❖

Urango llo luutaa ndu kita utondo.

Ujanja ndio uwezao kumsaidia mtu kuliko ujinga.

Cunning helps a person more than stupidity.

❖ 128 ❖

Kita ili kutuṛa nrwe tuṛa kisia kya rembo.

Kuliko kukosa kichwa ni heri kukosa matako ya kuketi.

Better to lack buttocks than a head.