

AFRICAN PROVERBS

Wisdom of
the People



Comboni Missionary Publications
United Kingdom and Ireland

African Proverbs

Wisdom of the People

**“We are people because
of our people”**

(Sotho, Lesotho)



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African Proverbs; The Precious Oil of Words;

Words in Africa carry weight, for there is strength in them: *"They create and give you life"*. Some words are as solid as the 'yam' and as sweet as 'kola', especially those spoken by the ancestors, who have handed them down the generations for their descendants to chew. And to make them tastier, they have flavoured them with the 'oil' of proverbs. Proverbs, according to the Igbo of Nigeria, are the 'condiment' with which we 'complement' words. Nothing reveals a people's spirit like their proverbs. Thus, one who knows Kikuyu (Kenya) or Logbara (Uganda) proverbs, knows the tradition from which they were born.

Proverbs are a mine of wisdom from which we can learn or re-affirm certain realities such as peace, social harmony, love for life, respect for the person and for property. Proverbs offer an insight into the reality in which a people live, and especially into the human heart.

In the Hausa (Nigeria) language, proverbs are called *karin magana* which literally means "wrapped up words". Those

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who know how to tell them have opened a little box of 'pearls' which contains a wisdom that throws new light on events and attitudes. But proverbs are not some sort of 'oracle' that claims to have the last word. As Malawian academic Patrick Kalilombe wrote: "Proverbs are a mirror in which a community can look at itself and reveal itself to others. They highlight the values, the aspirations, the worries, the behaviour of people and the angle from which they see and appreciate their reality, and their response. In the proverbs we see what we call mentality or living habits at their utmost".

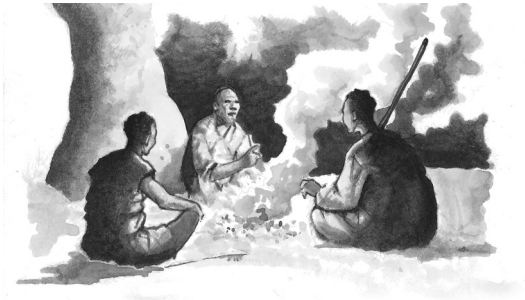
Reading or listening to proverbs, we see that African wisdom is not only rich and profound, but also that it is possible to collect and group such wisdom into great themes, highlighting the common points (and also the differences) between cultures.

Many proverbs spring from an identical perception of reality, although through different images. For example: "The farmer who has never left his fields thinks that his farming system is the best" (Hausa, Nigeria), and "He who has never left his village believes that no one can prepare porridge better than his mother" (Ewé, Togo).

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The proverb is a way of looking at life. It is not the only way, but it has the merit of indicating a direction of travel: “One way only is no way” (Malinké, Mali).

The proverb intervenes in discourse to air a thought, to sum up public opinion, to clarify a point, to spur a debate or to bring humour to serious matters. African wisdom has been handed down from generation to generation through proverbs, re-told by the *griot* or storyteller, from individuals who have been defined as: “tellers of the truth”, “keepers of ancient knowledge” or “people who awake the conscience”. Pleasant reading.



Man is a pilgrim on this earth; he does not know where his tomb is.

(Hausa, Nigeria)

Cutting by the tongue is different from cutting by the knife.

(Kikuyu, Kenya)

Many beads form one necklace.

(Fang, Gabon)

A good action reaps another.

(Ndau, Mozambique)

Birds which fly without co-ordination, beat each other's wings.

(Baganda, Uganda)

You can run away from the rain but not from the dew.

(Sukuma, Tanzania)

Peace is costly, but it is worth the expense.

(Kikuyu, Kenya)

Where there is negotiation, there is hope for agreement.

(Somali, Somalia)

Silence is also a form of speech.

(Fulani, Burkina Faso)

Respect yourself, you will get it back.

(Arabic, Tunisia)

A kind person is the one who is kind to strangers.

(Bakongo, Democratic Republic of Congo)

Little and lasting is better than much and passing.

(Berber, Morocco)

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By coming and going, a bird weaves its nest.

(Ashanti, Ghana)

Don't ask the price if you don't have
money to pay.

(Malagasy, Madagascar)



Work on your reputation until it is established; then it will work for you.

(Arabic, Tunisia)

Do not attempt what you cannot bring to a good end.

(Yoruba, Nigeria)

The sound of the drum depends on the drummer.

(Shona, Mozambique)

Glory does not come by calling.

(Akamba, Kenya)

An elephant can never fail to carry its tusks.

(Pedi, South Africa)

It is patience that gets you out of the net.

(Nyanja, Malawi)

In anger there is no intelligence.

(Sukuma, Tanzania)

A person is always thanked after death.

(Tswana, Botswana)

Advice is like fire: it has to be obtained from others.

(Venda, Zimbabwe)

Where there is purpose there is no failure.

(Tigrinya, Eritrea)

What the family talks about in the evening, the child says in the morning.

(Oromo, Ethiopia)

Beauty isn't wisdom.

(Mamprussi, Burkina Faso)



People know each other better on a journey.

(Tswana, Botswana)

The old hoe is still a friend.

(Logbara, Uganda)

Follow the river and find the sea.

(Lozi, Zambia)

You do not teach the paths of the forest
to an old gorilla.

**(Bushong, Democratic
Republic of Congo)**

The way you bring up a child is the way
it grows.

(Swahili, Tanzania)

What is sensible today may be
madness tomorrow.

(Yoruba, Nigeria)

Do not hurry the night; the sun will
always rise for its own sake.

(Kikuyu, Kenya)

Justice, like fire, even if covered with a veil, still burns.

(Swahili, Tanzania)

To be praised is to be ruined.

(Kikuyu, Kenya)

Too many captains sink the ship.

(Wolof, Gambia)

The guest who has broken the pot is not forgotten.

(Kweh, Cameroon)

Many heads, much knowledge.

(Ewé, Ghana)

People become what they want to become.

(Mende, Liberia)

The dance of an old man doesn't last long.

(Berge, Gabon)

An old pot keeps the water fresh.

(Tigrinya, Eritrea)

No day dawns like another.

(Turkana, Kenya)

The word of the elders becomes sweet
the day after.

(Chewa, Malawi)

The one who asks is not poisoned by
mushrooms.

(Mandigo, Guinea)

To protect an individual is to protect
society.

(Tonga, Zambia)

When two people fight in the water, they both get wet.

(Chewa, Malawi)

If someone accompanies you in darkness, accompany them in the moonlight.

(Azande, Sudan)

You know where you are coming from, but not where you are going.

(Maasai, Kenya)

Good beginnings make good endings.

(Akan, Ghana)

One who does not get lost by night, will not get lost by day.

(Hausa, Nigeria)

Rather than having no husband better be married to a deaf one.

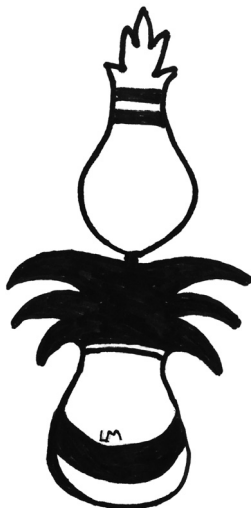
(Baganda, Uganda)

The son of the zebra also has stripes.

(Sukuma, Tanzania)

If the heart worries there is no lack
of tears.

(Oromo, Ethiopia)



Never throw away the old at the sight of
the new.

(Shona, Mozambique)

One head does not consume all
knowledge.

(Maasai, Kenya)

Blame the obstacle that caused your fall
and not the ground you fell on.

(Herero, Namibia)

Nobody is born with teeth.

(Logbara, Uganda)

It is the visitor who can clearly point out
where your house leaks.

(Yao, Malawi)

It is better to lick the hands of poverty
than the hands of death.

(Azande, Sudan)

The beginning is the most important part of the work.

(Igbo, Nigeria)

If you burn a house, you can't hide the smoke.

(Ovambo, Angola)

Strength does not correspond to knowledge.

(Kikuyu, Kenya)

If you do what you should not do, you will see what you should not see.

(Tshi, Ghana)

It is not where you are, but what you do there, that matters.

(Rundi, Rwanda)

No one knows the messenger of death.

(Mende, Sierra Leone)



Silence is also a form of speech.

(Fulani, Burkina Faso)

Hope is not equal to despair.

(Maasai, Kenya)

Politeness is gold.

**(Swahili, Democratic
Republic of Congo)**

Wisdom is like a baobab tree: a single
person's arms cannot embrace it.

(Akan, Ghana)

Better a curtain hanging motionless than
a flag blowing in the wind.

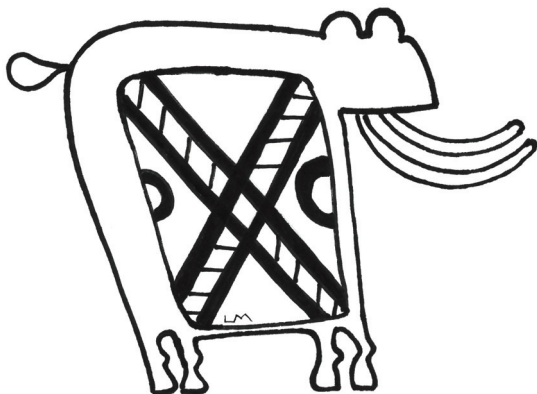
(Nandi, Congo)

Giving is not losing; it is keeping for
tomorrow.

(Lozi, Zambia)

The one who does not dig does not eat.

(Logbara, Uganda)



When elephants fight it is the grass
that suffers.

(Zulu, South Africa)

A wise person, skilled in the use of
proverbs, settles disputes.

(Yoruba, Nigeria)

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Do not separate your mind from your
tongue.

(Ancient Egyptian Saying)

What goes into the stomach is not lasting.

(Sotho, Lesotho)

Pride has no beauty.

(Chewa, Malawi)

A child brought up where there is always dancing cannot fail to dance.

(Nyanja, Zambia)

Education has no end.

(Mwanga, Tanzania)

If you throw a stone in a crowded market, you are likely to hit your relative.

(Nyanja, Zambia)

There are three things worth having in this world: courage, common sense and caution.

(Hausa, Nigeria)

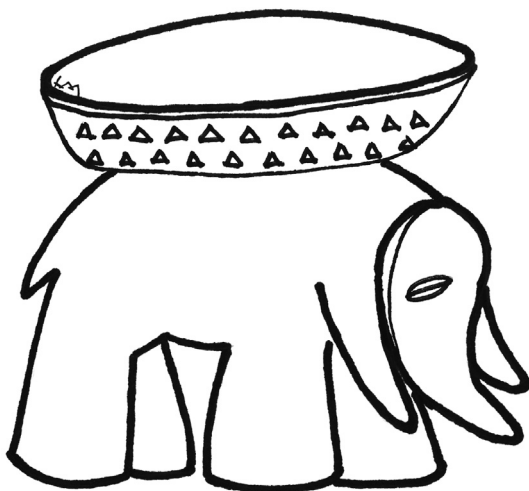
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He who does not ask questions learns nothing.

(Fang, Gabon)

A learned person is the one who has been told.

(Kikuyu, Kenya)



If you wait for tomorrow, tomorrow comes. If you don't wait for tomorrow, tomorrow comes.

(Malinke, West Africa)

Effort and capability are not the same.

(Maasai, Kenya)

It is better to lack something than to borrow.

(Rendille, Kenya)

One cannot be in debt and still talk big.

(Idoma, Nigeria)

Lending a friend money turns him into an enemy.

(Swahili, Zanzibar)

If you do not gather firewood, you cannot keep warm.

(Ovambo, Angola)

A snake bites where it reaches.

(Mudang, Chad)

The strength of a fish is in the water.

(Shona, Mozambique)

Appetite comes by tasting.

(Kaonde, Zambia)

If the food is delicious, the tongue knows.

(Tshi, Ghana)

What happens in the family is not for outsiders.

(Ewé, Togo)

Nobody can do what an expert cannot do.

(Shona, Mozambique)

A river is enlarged by its tributaries.

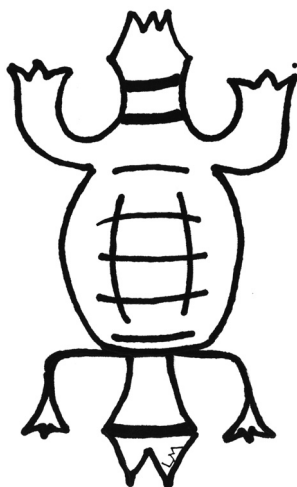
(Tugen, Kenya)

A matter does not overcome people in
the grave.

(Acholi, Uganda)

You cannot be too late to change.

(Mossi, Mali)



Never give up what you have seen for
what you have heard.

(Marakwet, Kenya)

Life can be understood backwards but
we live it forwards.

(Nandi, Congo)

The fox does not leave its tail behind.

(Tshi, Ghana)

The wise with a wink, the fool with a kick.

(Arabic, Egypt)

Fire is not extinguished with fire.

(Kikuyu, Kenya)

Insanity can be treated but not
foolishness.

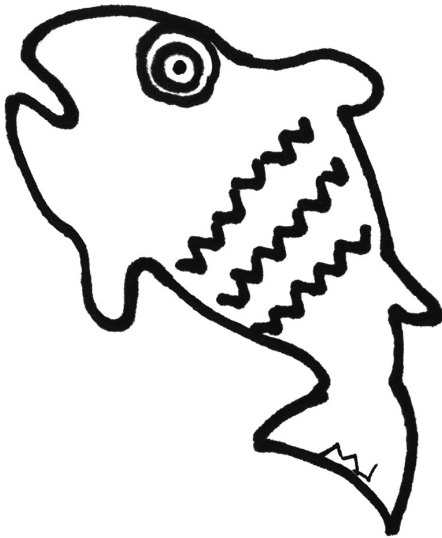
(Sukuma, Tanzania)

Never ask to be told the obvious.

(Kuria, Kenya)

Rice is one thing, but there are many
ways of cooking it.

(Swahili, Zanzibar)



For every rose there is a thorn.

(Igbo, Nigeria)

Better an intelligent enemy than a stupid friend.

(Baganda, Uganda)

If the speaker is a fool, the listener is no fool.

(Hausa, Nigeria)

Prepare now for the solution of tomorrow's problem.

(Swahili, Democratic Republic of Congo)

You will not be beaten when you think before acting.

(Maasai, Kenya)

To forget is the same as to throw away.

(Tumbuka, Malawi)

The tongue forgets more than the ear.

(Baganda, Uganda)

Those who do not forgive cannot expect to be forgiven.

(Tiv, Nigeria)

A powerful friend becomes a powerful enemy.

(Amharic, Ethiopia)

It is easier to lose a friend than to find one again.

(Ndau, Mozambique)

A dirty tongue litters its owner.

(Rundi, Rwanda)

Brief showers fill the stream.

(Lozi, Zambia)

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To give is to save.

(Ndonga, Namibia)

Gratitude is not servitude.

(Marta, Chad)

For a rash to heal, you must stop scratching it.

(Sukuma, Tanzania)

If you invite yourself, bring your own chair.

(Swahili, Democratic Republic of Congo)

There is truth even in humour.

(Ovambo, Angola)

Hope kills nobody.

(Kongo, Democratic Republic of Congo)

Not to know is bad, not to wish to know is worse.

(Wolof, Gambia)

To thank God is better than to thank your mother-in-law.

(Hausa, Nigeria)

The ignorant praises his own ignorance.

(Teso, Uganda)

A big heart is better than a big brain.

(Guro, Ivory Coast)

Be kind to the one who is kind to you.

**(Zande, Democratic
Republic of Congo)**

The only friendly cow is one which gives milk.

(Kikuyu, Kenya)

Repeat only what you have seen, not what you have heard.

(Arabic, Tunisia)

It is better to be poor in youth than in
old age.

(Venda, Zimbabwe)

One hundred aunts are not equal to
one mother.

(Krio, Sierra Leone)



If the father wants a huge dowry, the daughters grow old without husbands.

(Rundi, Rwanda)

A man who knows nothing is not aware of his ignorance.

(Baganda, Uganda)

A hungry stomach knows no law.

(Tsonga, Mozambique)

Anger in the mind, smile on the teeth.

(Igbo, Nigeria)

Gather firewood to the capacity of the string.

(Twi, Ghana)

Judgement must wait to hear all the witnesses.

(Mende, Liberia)

A good name is better than riches.

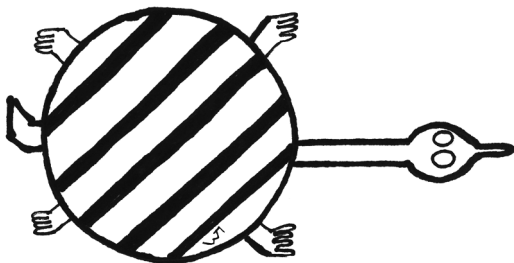
(Zarma, Niger)

If a tree does not have branches, it does
not have shade.

(Sukuma, Tanzania)

A nice word is better than a nice
mattress.

(Oromo, Ethiopia)



You are bad if you are good only to
yourself.

(Tswa, Zimbabwe)

If you sleep, your business sleeps too.

(Kaonde, Zambia)

Lazy people are always tired.

(Malagasy, Madagascar)



Sleep on it before speaking.

(Ancient Egyptian Saying)

Truth should be in love, and love in truth.

(Swahili, Tanzania)

The lucky person can sell water even
near the Niger River.

(Hausa, Nigeria)

If you want to catch a monkey, behave
like one.

(Ndau, Mozambique)

What you sow is what you reap.

(Mungaka, Cameroon)

Better a mistake at the beginning than at
the end.

(Fulani, Nigeria)

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One who talks, thinks; but one who
keeps silent, thinks more.

(Baganda, Uganda)

An old person has eaten a lot of wisdom.

(Bade, Ivory Coast)

We are people because of our people.

(Sotho, Lesotho)

Nothing is impossible to a woman of will.

(Mandigo, Guinea)

Poverty is like a lion, if you do not fight it,
you get eaten.

(Maasai, Tanzania)

The left hand learns before the right one
is broken.

(Ovambo, Angola)

A young monkey does not teach tricks to
an old one.

(Swahili, Zanzibar)

One who knows no proverbs does not
know the ancestors.

(Igbo, Nigeria)

Nothing hurts like shame.

(Ashanti, Ghana)

Eyes have no boundaries.

(Shona, Mozambique)

The eyes discern the beauty but not the
kindness of a person.

(Kikuyu, Kenya)

The mouth talks plenty which the heart
does not say.

(Ewé, Ghana)

The way one speaks is the way one acts.

(Baganda, Uganda)

Think first before you speak.

(Tsonga, Mozambique)

What you say is what you will be judged
by.

(Luhya, Kenya)



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Nobody is born wise.

(Kikuyu, Kenya)

A person always looking at the sky will
never discover anything on the ground.

(Chewa, Malawi)

You know what to say, but not what you
will be told.

(Maasai, Kenya)

Bitter truth is better than sweet
falsehood.

(Swahili, Uganda)

If you look for trouble, you will not miss it.

(Mossi, Burkina Faso)

One's own language is never hard.

(Igbo, Nigeria)

However tall you grow, you will never be
taller than the hair on your head.

(Mende, Sierra Leone)

The size of a river depends on its streams.

(Akamba, Kenya)

Advice is useful when one listens.

(Tigrinya, Eritrea)

Truth reaches the market and
becomes unsaleable, but falsehood is
always in demand.

(Yoruba, Nigeria)



The son whose father works his field
does not know that things are precious.

(Marba, Chad)

A good word removes anger.

(Ga, Ghana)

A child is the reward of God.

(Yoruba, Nigeria)

You do not pasture the goats where the
leopard hunts.

**(Bangala, Democratic
Republic of Congo)**

Knowing too much is being ignorant.

(Kikuyu, Kenya)

The child becomes an adult by himself,
not by the others.

**(Mongo, Democratic
Republic of Congo)**

Wisdom comes even from a small anthill.

(Tumbuka, Malawi)

A word once said cannot be taken back.

(Kikuyu, Kenya)

The one who did not accept advice built
a house on the sand.

(Chewa, Malawi)

The family is like a roof made out of
pumpkin leaves.

(Zulu, South Africa)

It is not the eye that understands, but
the mind.

(Hausa, Nigeria)

Shoulders are never higher than the head.

(Lunde, Zambia)

When you follow the path of your father,
you learn to walk like him.

(Akan, Ghana)

An eagle does not fly very high if the
wings don't hold it.

(Oromo, Ethiopia)

Fast is well, slow is well, but careful is
better.

(Baule, Ivory Coast)

A hammer in the hands of young people
becomes a nutcracker.

(Fang, Gabon)

Mountains do not meet; people do.

(Samburu, Kenya)

He who does not sweat in his youth will
extend his hand when old.

(Ewé, Ghana)

Misfortune makes us know who loves us.

(Yao, Malawi)

To be without friends is to be really poor.

(Somali, Somalia)

An old man may miss his target when
throwing a stone, but not with his
mouth.

(Tonga, Zambia)

Not even counsel can make strong a man
whose character is weak.

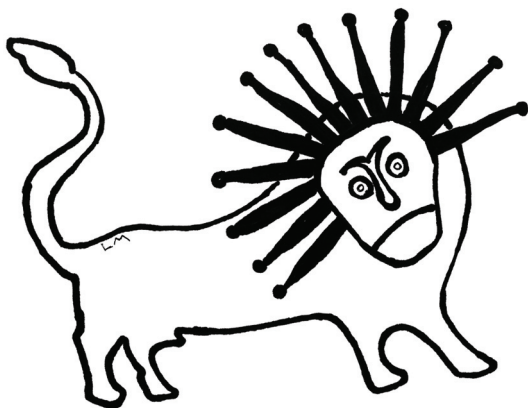
(Luo, Kenya)

Many friends empty the stomach.

(Hausa, Nigeria)

What is old for one may be new for
another.

(Shona, Mozambique)



A good word removes anger.

(Ga, Ghana)

There is always room for the person you
love, even if the house is crowded.

(Sukuma, Tanzania)

Try to do what you can do.

(Chewa, Malawi)

Two steps forward to advance, a step
back to check.

(Duala, Cameroon)

When we lie, we renounce peace.

(Malagasy, Madagascar)

Work made in a hurry does not pay.

(Swahili, Zanzibar)

The little bird lays its eggs next to the
wasps' nest.

(Bari, Sudan)

A naked hand cannot grasp the fire.

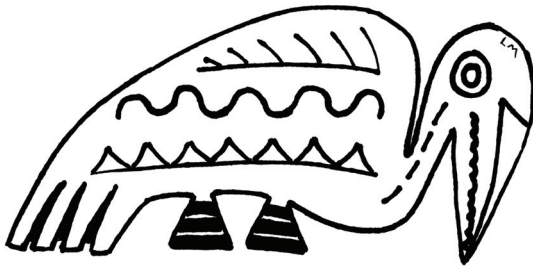
(Peul, Mauritania)

Whoever blames your fault is helping
you to be wise.

(Basa, Liberia)

The tongue slumbers more than the foot.

(Tigrinya, Eritrea)



A real person is not afraid of trying.

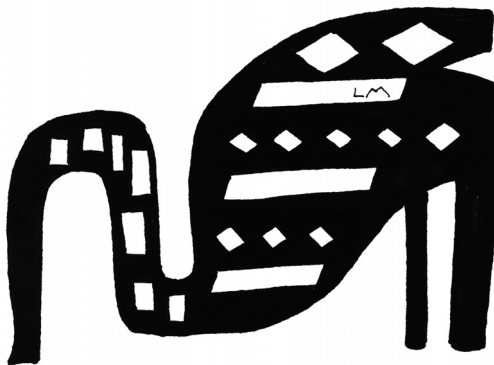
(Sukuma, Tanzania)

A word out of the mouth is an egg
slipped from the hand.

(Amharic, Ethiopia)

The one who gives thanks for the gift
of yesterday will receive another gift
tomorrow.

(Mende, Sierra Leone)



What was found without effort, will be lost without effort.

(Rundi, Rwanda)

Do not insult a crocodile before crossing the river.

(Ewé, Togo)

The sun rises even if the cock does not crow.

(Batiki, Ivory Coast)

Prepare food for guests even if they pretend not to be hungry.

(Luhya, Kenya)

Recommendation is one thing, getting accepted is something else.

(Geez, Ethiopia)

If you pick up too much, some falls down.

(Fang, Gabon)

Patience is the talisman of life.

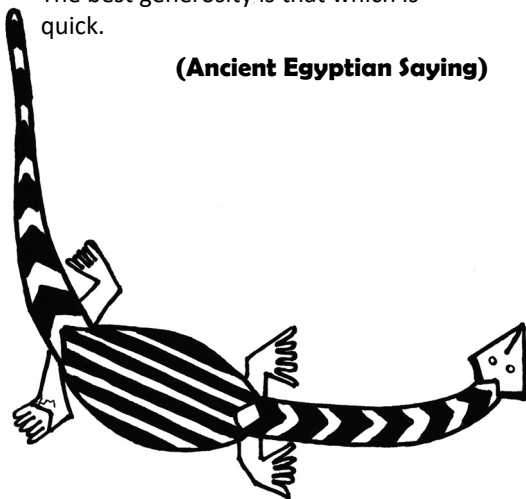
(Chewa, Malawi)

If you bury truth by the head, it will arise
by the feet.

(Tigrinya, Eritrea)

The best generosity is that which is
quick.

(Ancient Egyptian Saying)



Falsehood is like the sand: soft when you lie on it; hard when you get up.

(Malagasy, Madagascar)

Thoughts follow the eyes.

(Mandigo, Guinea)

Suffering teaches the wisdom of the ancestors.

(Daula, Cameroon)

A delicate thing is not difficult to injure.

(Herero, Namibia)

To lie is easy, to repair the damage, difficult.

(Malagasy, Madagascar)

We know the body but not the heart.

(Chewa, Malawi)

Don't laugh at a boat being tossed by the waves; your relatives may be in it.

(Swahili, Kenya)

Do not trust in a liar even if he tells the truth.

(Makua, Mozambique)

One day is in favour of you and another day against you.

(Somali, Somalia)

Whoever sees something good must tell it to others.

(Baganda, Uganda)



The desire to cheat and the refusal to be cheated are the cause of noise in the market.

(Igala, Nigeria)

Tears are no language.

(Kikuyu, Kenya)

Good is when I steal other people's wives and cattle; bad is when they steal mine.

(Zulu, South Africa)



Comboni Missionaries

Almost 4,000 Comboni Missionary priests, brothers, sisters and lay-people of forty-four nationalities continue the mandate of Jesus Christ to make disciples of all nations. Following the example of our Founder, Saint Daniel Comboni (1831-1881), we work among the 'poorest and most abandoned' in forty-five countries of Africa, the Americas and Asia.

In the United Kingdom and Ireland, we promote the ideals of the Missionary Church through the witness of the written and spoken word - our missionary magazine and booklets, our websites, and speaking to Congregations in Parishes about our work and the missionary vocation.

We endeavour to bring the light of the Gospel to bear on the great world issues of justice and peace, human and religious rights, and the plight of the developing nations, their needs, values and cultures.

In the Missions we co-operate with the Local Church in running parishes, schools, and hospitals, social and training centres.

Our work is financed by the generosity of our friends and assisted by their prayers and support.

We are blessed with many vocations in the South of the world, young men and women who require education and training to become missionaries to the world.

We invite you to share with us in our missionary work and life as partners. May you, too, experience the joy of making Christ and his Gospel known to the whole world.

The proverb is a way of looking at life. It is not the only way, but it has the merit of indicating a direction of travel: “One way only is no way” (Malinké, Mali).

African wisdom has been handed down from generation to generation through proverbs, re-told by the *griot* or storyteller, from individuals who have been defined as: “tellers of the truth”, “keepers of ancient knowledge” or “people who awake the conscience”.

