African Proverb of the Month
May, 2003

Kud mbelawa a hada a hwad. (Mafa)
Les larmes de l'orphelin coulent dans le ventre. (French)
The tears of the orphan run inside. (English)

Mafa (Cameroon, Nigeria and Niger) Proverb

Background, Explanation, Meaning and Everyday Use

This proverb comes from a context where life is very hard. The word "kud" or "kuda" in the Mafa language means "cry" or "tears." The Mafa people basically live in Mayo Tsanaga in Far North Cameroon, but they are also found in various other cities of northern Cameroon, northern Nigeria and even recently in southern Niger. Their natural environment is very hostile. They have only three to four months of rainy season during which they work very hard to grow the quantity of millet they need in order to survive during the whole year. In such a context, particularly when the harvest is very poor, it may happen that people suffer from hunger and orphans may be neglected by the large family that is supposed to take care of them when their parents die. They simply do not pay attention to them. The image of tears running inside (literally "in the stomach") is very meaningful because normally tears are visible. Here the tears run inside ("in the stomach") and for this reason, they are invisible. This proverb is generally used by orphans or those who are confronted by the problem of social injustice and are not able to solve the problem themselves.

Biblical Parallels

The Bible condemns affliction or injustice perpetrated against orphans (Exodus 22:22;
Deuteronomy 24:17). God executes justice for the orphan and the widow (Deut. 10:18). God wants His people to provide food for the orphans (Deut. 24:19-21). God has special blessings for those who take care of the orphans (Deut. 10:29). The Letter of James stresses also the importance of taking care of the orphans when he writes: "This is pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father, to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world" (James 1:27). A Christian should never neglect the orphans. God want him or her to pay attention to the cries of the orphans, to protect their rights and to provide for their needs.
Contemporary Use and Religious Application

Nowadays this Mafa proverb is used as a call to come back to the value of solidarity, one of the key values in Mafa culture. In the religious context this proverb is a good illustration to condemn the oppression of the orphans, the poor, the marginalized and the voiceless in the society and to encourage believers to demonstrate their love and concern for the orphans by defending their cause and providing to their needs. One particular challenge in Africa today is to reach out to and help AIDS orphans.

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