

African Proverb of the Month June, 2000

Fulu bende oro ngege. - Luo

Hata furu (uduvi) humtuma sato. - Swahili

Even haplochromis (name of a small fish) employs tilapia (name of a large fish). - English

Luo ([Kenya](#) , [Tanzania](#) , [Uganda](#))

Explanation and Everyday Use

Proverbs are so important in the Luo Ethnic Group in East Africa that they can easily be thought of, independently, as an institution. They have the clout of wisdom and are used in various connotations to express deep feelings. For example, in the past courting for marriage has been and still is, in some parts of the community, habitually "proverbial." This Luo proverb uses two kinds of fish: "haplochromis" and "tilapia." Haplochromis is a small fish that belongs to the family of cichelidae and is 6cm to10cm long while tilapia is much bigger and weighs two kilograms. Both are edible and their main distribution area is Lake Victoria, a fresh water lake in East Africa.

Younger people basically use the proverb when they are requesting their elders to oblige them. For example, a younger person doing an important computer "upgrade" may politely request his elder: "Dear Levi, can I send you to Lazarus as I am too busy to leave my present work in this place; please, for even haplochromis employs tilapia." Though the conventional use of the proverb targets the younger and the older, it is also applied to other groups such as the junior and the senior, the powerless and the powerful, the feeble and the mighty, those with the influence and those without, in some cases women and men, and so on.

The proverb is essentially about the senior indiscriminately doing what the junior asks of him or her. It is about legitimate equality and submission in employing or sending each other. In other words, it is about responsiveness to humble calls or requests and has many specific examples. It calls upon church leaders, the shepherds, to especially be humble, listen to their flocks' views and concerns and reasonably attend to their wishes and problems -- for the possible achievement of a more flock-oriented church, the type of which Leith Anderson advocates in his

book *A Church for the 21st Century* (Bethany House Publishers). For other individuals the proverb dispels the feeling of an inferiority complex or degradation in them. It tells them that they should not consider themselves inferior or degraded when they are being employed or sent by their juniors. The message is also hammered into the world's insensitive rulers' ears that leaders should heed and be responsive to their citizens' agitation for popular rights and decency such as multiparty democracy, non-violation of human rights, eradication of corruption and improved standards of living without fear of their status or esteem being lowered.

Similarly, the developed or industrialized countries like the Group of Seven (G7) and the major international financial institutions such as the IMF and World Bank need to listen to the voices of those who are perceived as voiceless or the small -- the poor. It is in this perspective that globalization is also viewed. It is by listening to and heeding the calls of the helpless and the poor that a globalization forum may not attract radical demonstrations that in turn attract unacceptable paramilitaristic dispersal. It is by listening and responding to the voices or concerns of the "small" that multinational pharmaceutical companies manufacture AZT and related drugs cheaply so that such drugs can be affordable to the poor and presently somewhat save or prolong thousands of lives. It is by listening and positively responding to the requests of its "haplochromis" that the world can achieve acceptable levels of justice and equity and effectively overcome some of its sensitive problems of the international debt crisis, hunger, disease and conflicts with their attendant situations. Insensitivity to the calls of the disadvantaged can lead to extreme hopelessness, stagnation and regression with misery and death as ultimate products.

On the other hand, the proverb gives hope or encouragement to the "junior." It reassures him or her of the non-existence of fundamental differences between him or her and the "senior" as both of them belong to one and the same set of God's special creation. It also liberates the person from diffidence and again reassures him or her of equal respect and advancement opportunity. Human beings are equal before God and need each other's equal treatment. This also means the acceptance of unlimited readiness for each other's call or concern. But acceptance of this position – particularly of the senior being sent by the junior -- is an area in which demonstration of our uneasiness manifests itself. Although this proverb is an African "saying" in many African societies (see the similar Sukuma, Tanzania proverb *Even an elephant, that is, an important person can be sent*), men consider it a near taboo to be sent by a woman. They simply ignore the essence of their own proverb. Even after the Beijing declaration to upgrade the status of women, initiatives towards the reversal of this conservative discriminating and despising attitude seem to be comparatively unimpressive. This is so because "listening and positive response" is a matter of love being the principal determinant - that is intrinsically lacking in the above cases.

Biblical Parallels

1. "In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!" (*Colossians* 3:11). "Rather, these distinctive conditions of life and existence are placed at the service of God, of the church, and of humankind... in the church the differentiation in classes, natural and spiritual gifts and nations is placed at the service of the whole" (from the article "Theology of Humankind" in *Exploring Church Growth* edited by Wilbert R. Shenk and published by William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company).

2. *Romans* 15:1-7. John Howard Yoder quotes this scriptural text in commenting on the Way of Jesus as "serving others as he served himself." Those of us who have a robust conscience must accept as our own burden the tender scruples of weaker persons and not consider ourselves. Each of us must consider his or her neighbor... for Christ too did not consider himself... in a word accept one another as Christ accepted us.

Religious Use

The proverb tells or reminds us that if we have not been living in conformity with its moral we should work for the transformation of ourselves. We should move into a new, uniform position whose principal architect is love. Christopher Mallia entitles his booklet on the sacrament of Baptism *The New Life of Love* (published by Paulines Publications Africa). In the realm of the proverb's implication this title is immediately appealing or suggestive. We need to enter a new life of love in which we would now be practically accommodative of being sent by our juniors or those who are under us. The title acts as a referral opportunity or as flashcard for us all as it implies or presupposes initiation of efforts towards acquisition, restoration and preservation of overriding - or to use Yoder's description - indiscriminate love - that leads to unified submission as in this tilapia and haplochromis proverbial case.

Haplochromis and tilapia permanently live in and enjoy fresh water. We also permanently need fresh (or new) life that is God's free gift to us. And, Shenk's book is punctuated with the word "mission." Our proverbial mission should be preaching by deed an overriding love and its virtues of submission and responsiveness that are required of us.

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