

African Proverb of the Month **February, 2005**

Biye ojemo ni ng'wen. (Luo)

Mchwa awachongea kumbikumbi. (Swahili)

The fierce white ants cause the death of the kind and harmless ants. (Literal English translation)

Termites cause death, damage, and great harm to white ants. (Meaning English translation)

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

Background, Explanation, Meaning and Everyday Use

“Biye” are fierce white ants or termites which are destructive in nature. They eat and destroy wooden-built and grass-thatched Luo houses in East Africa. They live in anthills. As it is the Luo people did not know the modern scientific chemicals for destroying the pests. So what they did was that the people upset by the destruction caused by the white ants identified the nearest anthill in which the queen ant lived. Then they pulled down the entire anthill by digging it out. Fire was then lit on top of the ants in the dug hole so as to exterminate the ants and their source.

In contrast “ng'wen,” another type of ants, are kind and harmless and delicious to eat. They have bulky stomachs full of fat and are sweet and edible when cooked. They live together with the white ants in anthills. They do not seem to take part in building the residences in which they and the white ants live. However, they are always found to be living with the fierce ants. Because they live inseparably with the white ants in the same residences, they always fall victims to the destruction process aimed at destroying the white ants. Consequently even the “ng'wen” become exterminated along with white ants whose company they cannot avoid.

Biblical Parallels

Genesis 3:16-19: God pronounces judgment on Adam and Eve; from the biblical text their posterity is included in the pronounced judgment.

Genesis 3:23–24: Adam and Eve are sent out of the garden.

Contemporary Use and Religious Application

The Luo people in Kenya and Tanzania teach that the elders of families and societies should refrain from indulging in unethical conducts and social misbehaviors during their lifetime. The Luos believe in the continuity of the families and societies as a going concern. Evil conducts on the part of the elders is believed to be a sign or bad omen which may thwart the growth of the families and societies. So the elders are always expected to apply wisdom in their social dealings lest a bad omen befall their posterity as a result of their misdeeds.

Luo elders are always expected to pave the way for the future success and achievements of their offspring. In which case, therefore, the society expects them to be of good conduct in their everyday lives so that the traditional curses, that may befall their posterity leading to failures in life, do not befall them.

When Adam and Eve became disobedient and defied God's orders on what to eat and not to eat in the Garden of Eden God had to pronounce judgment over them. The punishment spilled over the entire human race in the form of original sin. As a result, all human beings are culpable, they being Adam and Eve's descendants.

In principle Adam and Eve's posterity should have been innocent but for the fact that they are children of Adam and Eve. How then can they escape their parents' sins? There is no way. The net result is that the whole world is filled with sin. This affects all of us today. But the whole world is filled with goodness too.

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