

## African Proverb of The Month April, 2011

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*Yashinga mu minzi itelaga.* (Sukuma)

*Kukaa muda mrefu ndani ya maji si kutakata.* (Swahili)

*Rester longtemps dans l'eau ne lave pas.* (French)

*To stay a long time in the water does not make you clean.* (English)

Sukuma ( [Tanzania](#) ) Proverb

### **Background, Explanation, History and Everyday Use**

The Sukuma people form the biggest ethnic group in Tanzania with more than six million members. This population is concentrated in and around Mwanza and Shinyanga Regions. Other present ethnic groups have been progressively isolated or assimilated into this big unit. To speak the Sukuma language is the most normal thing in many villages of the area, and many Sukuma beliefs and practices are very much alive today.

The Sukuma Cultural Centre and Museum in Bujora near Mwanza is increasingly visited by school children and young people. There is a sense in urban centres such as in Mwanza city and in some other places that parts of the population are losing touch with their ancient traditions and they feel the need to rediscover what had been the lives of their ancestors. Nowadays many young people might feel being Tanzanians, or aspire to be modern people familiar with new technologies and with Swahili and English before feeling being part of the Sukuma heritage. Nowadays, it is rare to find somebody able to read and write in Sukuma language even when able to speak it.

To live in Sukumaland might not be enough to make you familiar with what makes a Sukuma person. It takes something else, that is, some efforts and interests for what represent the values and beliefs of Sukuma people in order to integrate them in one's life. To stay in the water for a long time does not necessarily make you clean; it takes some effort as well.

Sometimes this saying is accompanied with a story whose details delight children: One day a great competition was addressed to the animal kingdom in order to find out who was the cleanest of all. Fish of the Lake Victoria felt very proud by telling themselves that because they live in the water, they cannot be defeated. As a result, they did not care about their cleanliness when the great day arrived. Crabs presented themselves with sands all over their bodies, fish with algae around their neck, crocodiles with meat parcels between their teeth and so on. They were quickly dismissed. Meanwhile, animals such pigs, monkeys or donkeys prepared themselves very well by taking pains to wash themselves and were consequently winners. The teaching is plain: Do not assume your condition is sufficient in order for you to reach a certain achievement. Do not neglect hard work in order to succeed.

## Biblical Parallels



This teaching has lots of clear and strong parallels in Jesus' teaching. Jesus was a Jew and his people were the Jewish people who had already in his time become proud to have been specially selected and cherished by God. But Jesus reminds his listeners that reality might be somewhat more complex. For instance in Luke 3: 8-9: "Bear fruits that befit repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

The insistence with which Jesus declares that those who might be accepted to the kingdom of God might not be those who are expected before hand is a constant warning of this reality. In *Luke*

10: 25-37 a Samaritan wins over a Levite and a priest in doing the justice of God, that is, somebody who was living away from the strict rules of good worship is found in better position than the spiritual teachers of his times. Again in

*Luke*

17: 11-19 while Jesus has healed ten lepers, only a Samaritan comes back with his heart full of gratitude. In

*Matthew*

25: 31-46 those finally accepted to the banquet are none of those who had expected to be there in the first place.

A patient reading of the Gospels will reveal many other instances of the same kind.

## Contemporary Use and Religious Application

Life requires constant efforts, and it is not well advised to rest upon one's previous achievements. A teacher who is not interested to improve his knowledge and methods of teaching will find himself soon outdated. A doctor who neglects seminars and ongoing renewals might find himself or herself deprived of his or her licence to practice the person's knowledge.

Within the Christian Churches' context and religious life there are special temptations for spiritual leaders and guides to sometimes neglect their own spiritual selves before attending to those of others. The wisdom of elders stands here together with the teaching of Jesus to remind us forcefully that the hat does not make the monk, and it is not enough to wear with pride titles and to receive praise from this world.

Some efforts to meditate and contemplate on the inside of things and of people especially in an African context may be consulted on these websites: <http://www.pascalbcd.over-blog.com> (in French), or <http://www.pascalbcdeng.over-blog.com> (in English).

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