Mar. 2012: "Look up, Tungu my child." – Sukuma (Tanzania) Proverb

African Proverb of The Month
March 2012

Ng’wigulya, Tungu ngwana wane. (Sukuma)
Mtoto wangu Tungu, juu. (Swahili)
Regarde plus haut Tungu mon enfant (French)
Look up, Tungu my child. (English)

Sukuma (Tanzania) Proverb

Background, Explanation, Meaning 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. This Sukuma proverb comes from a true story during famine time. A long time ago there was a famine in Shinyanga Region in Tanzania. The local Sukuma people had no maize (corn) and survived mainly by eating dried greens that were boiled. It so happened that a small group of men went to look for food. After walking for a long way it was getting dark so they said to each other, “Let’s go to that house over there to sleep. We will continue our journey early in the morning.”

The house where they decided to sleep was the home of a young boy called Tungu. When Tungu’s mother saw the men approaching, she said to herself, “What can I do now? We hardly have any flour left. My son Tungu will go to bed hungry.” Then she went to Tungu who was sitting with the men who had just come and said to him quietly, “Tungu, when I am preparing the food I will paste the bugali (the Sukuma word for stiff, cooked maize meal) under the rim on the top of the pot. In the bottom of the pot I will put the dried greens." When she finished the cooking and the food was ready to eat she said in a loud voice, Look up, Tungu my child. Tungu looked up and saw the bugali under the rim on the top of the pot and started to eat. The visiting men had no idea what was happening and continued to eat the dried greens in the bottom of the pot.

That night Tungu went to bed on a full stomach.

Biblical Parallels

“So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated
at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory. ... Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. 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* 3:1-11).

“Look up to the Lord with gladness and smile. Your face will never be ashamed” (*Psalm* 34:6).

“Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you” (*Luke* 17:20-21)

“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus…” (*Philippians* 2:5-11).

**Contemporary Use and Religious Application**

The main teaching is that we should not be slaves of secular and materialistic culture. We should give priority to spiritual values. We should give “prime time” to God. Also there should be no discrimination or favoritism or tribalism or negative ethnicity in our lives here in Africa.

Rev. Donald Sybertz, M.M.  
Ndoleleji Parish  
P.O. Box 47  
Shinyanga, Tanzania  
[DSybertz@Maryknoll.org](mailto:DSybertz@Maryknoll.org)

Photographs provided by:

Cephas Yao Agbemenu  
Department of Art and Design  
Kenyatta University  
P.O. Box 43844  
Nairobi, Kenya  
Cellphone: 254-723-307992  
Email: [cyagbemenu@yahoo.com](mailto:cyagbemenu@yahoo.com)