African Wisdom

African proverbs and sayings give advice to Americans celebrating Kwanzaa

By Mary Landers

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Growing up, Chuka Odunukwe's dad would tell him, "A black goat is best looked for when the sun is up."

It wasn't instructions for capturing farm animals.

"It's what my father would tell me when I was goofing off," said Odunukwe, the sixth of 11 children. "You have to work now, or ultimately when you grow up you're not going to get anywhere."

The larger lesson wasn't lost on the boy from southeast Nigeria who became a surgeon in Savannah.

From whimsical to profound, African sayings and proverbs reflect the diversity of the continent. Kwanzaa, a celebration of African heritage that began Wednesday, provides a great reason to learn more about them.

Many African sayings convey advice you've heard before.

"Sugar cane isn't eaten for its tallness but for its sweetness," say people in the southern African country of Malawi. In other words, "You can't judge a book by its cover."

Odunukwe gives another example: "For a cow that has no tail, God drives the flies away."

Cows flick away flies with their tails, he explained. But their tails also get soiled and attract flies.

So cows without tails aren't so molested by flies after all.

"God takes care of disadvantages in unique ways for us," Odunukwe said.

A parent might tell this saying to a child who complains he's too slow for the soccer team. But the child could still have better ball control than faster opponents, pointed out Odunukwe, who at 43 no longer plays the game he grew up with. He's too old, he said, laughing when he realized the saying applied to him.
In Tanzania and neighboring Kenya, women wear their proverbs. Much like Americans announce their beliefs on T-shirts, traditional sayings scroll across the hem of bold-patterned wraps that women wear as skirts.

Anne Simmons, who makes and sells jewelry at Osibisa Gallery in Savannah's City Market, grew up in Machakos, a small Kenyan town.

Simmons has a collection of the wraps, called kagwas.

An orange and yellow one states in Swahili "Don't celebrate the war, cry for peace." A purple one proclaims "Love needs faith and kindness."

Kenyan women purchase the wraps for their sayings as well as their patterns.

"If you want to insult somebody you're annoyed with, you give them a kanga with bad writings," Simmons said.

An example?

A young single woman might receive a kanga that says "Somebody with a big mouth can never get a husband."

But proverbs aren't just a women's thing in Kenya.

John Mbugua, the activities director at Westview Nursing & Rehabilitation Center, admonishes his 7-year-old daughter with proverbs. His grandmother and mother taught him with them, too.

His favorite, he said, translating in his head from his native Kikuyu into Swahili then to English, is, "A bug that bites you has to be inside your coat."

The proverb can be applied to the aftermath of Sept. 11, said Mbugua, whose Kenyan name is Mbugua Kariuki. The thing that injured Americans after the attack -- anthrax -- probably came from inside the country and was not the external threat everyone worried about.

Olufunke Bowen, an associate professor of criminal justice at Savannah State University, said proverbs reflect the customs, values, philosophy and way of life of the people.

Growing up in Lagos, then the capital of Nigeria, she learned a saying about discipline and personal responsibility.

"Hard work doesn't kill," say the people of her ethnic group, the Yoruba, "It's poverty that kills."

"It means you never complain about hard work," she said. "We instill that in kids."
African Proverbs on the Internet

African proverbs, sayings and stories are compiled and explained on the Website www.afriprov.org.

The Urban Ministries Support Group in Nairobi, Kenya sponsors and hosts the site.

Run by Rev. Joseph Healey, a priest born in Detroit and who now lives in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, the site includes proverbs of the month, with a section on Biblical parallels.

The whole range of African oral tradition -- including proverbs, sayings, stories and songs -- can be used to proclaim the Gospel, Healey wrote in e-mail from Tanzania.

The site posts a 2002 African Proverbs Calendar with graphics and a proverb featured each month.

The site also includes a connection to a listserv where participants ask questions of, and obtain materials from, other people with similar interests.

"Of our 170 subscribers, many come from the U.S.A.," Healey wrote in e-mail. "Our Web site and e-mail mailing list is free and welcomes participation."

A welcome message at the site concludes with two proverbs. The first explains its mission: "One who sees something good must narrate it." The second indicates the site is on ongoing work: "That which is good is never finished."

The complete article with photographs and African designs can be found at the following URL:


Reporter Mary Landers can be reached at the local Georgia number: 912-652-0337 or GA WATTS: 1-800-533-1150 or landers@savannahnow.com

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