

# **BASSA PROVERBS**

**FOR PREACHING AND TEACHING**

**Abba Karnga**

**Asempa Publishers  
Christian Council of Ghana  
Box 919, Accra.**

*AFRICAN PROVERBS PROJECT*

**PROVERBS FOR PREACHING AND TEACHING SERIES**

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## CONTENTS

Foreword	...	...
Acknowledgements	...	...
Introduction	...	...

### PART I

Chapter 1	Emphases of Bassa Proverbs	...	...
2	Emphases of Biblical Proverbs	...	...
3	The Gospel And Bassa Proverbs	...	...
4	Suggestions for Further Study and Reflection	...	...

### PART II

5	Examples of Annotated Bassa Proverbs for Preaching and Teaching	...	...
	Additional Bassa Proverbs not annotated	...	...
	Index by Theological Topic	...	...
	Index by Purpose/ Occasion of Use	...	...
	Index by Biblical Texts Cited	...	...

## FOREWORD

The *Proverbs for Preaching and Teaching* Series is one facet of the many-sided African Proverbs Project (see note following this Foreword), an international, interdisciplinary effort to promote the collection, study and publication of proverbs. Proverbs are an endangered heritage of African peoples, under increasing threat from Western influences including Western education.

The Project was organized to find and encourage the people who already working to preserve and promote African proverbs as well as to recruit additional people to blaze some new trails in proverb study and use. The *Proverbs for Preaching and Teaching* Series is one of these new trails, perhaps the most promising one. Rev. Joshua Kudadjie of Ghana, Rev. Abba Karnga of Liberia and Rev. David Mphande, all with long experience in preaching and religious education, were recruited to pioneer the way by producing annotated proverb collections in their own languages. As Series Editor, Rev. Kudadjie wrote the model book and coached his two colleagues through the writing process. All three repeatedly went above and beyond the call of duty. We commend them for their devotion to the task and congratulate them on the quality of their work.

Many other African proverb collections have been written and a few of these, such as William Lane's *50 Proverbs: Traditional and Christian Wisdom*, used an approach similar to our Series. They showed how the heritage of traditional proverbs can be adapted for Christian use. However, as far as we know these three books are the first proverb books specifically designed both as textbooks for pastoral training centers and as resource books for pastors and other church educators.

Though the grant-funded period of our Project is soon to come to a close, the ripple effects of these books may spread out in many ways in years to come. For example, faculty who use the textbooks in their local language could supplement them with proverbs and notes of their own, or they could require each graduating student to submit five or ten more proverbs with notes and explanations. These additional proverbs could be published in booklet form as a gift of the graduating class to the entire church or serially in a church paper or be adapted for use on radio.

For examination purposes, faculty could set ten proverbs and require students to write short essays on two or three of them, showing how they would use these proverbs

in preaching. Conversely, faculty could set a Scripture passage and ask students to write down and explain proverbs which could be used when preaching on it. By such methods they would be training a new generation to draw on their own cultural resources instead of merely on Western theological textbooks.

Another possibility is that the English translations of these three books may serve as an inspiration and model for many other African writers working in other languages. Whether they follow the pattern precisely or adapt it to fit better in their own situations, they would be doing a great service to the Church. They are helping Christians work out a Christ-pleasing way of relating the new gospel to the old traditions.

Still another great possibility for the books is for use by black pastors in the Caribbean, North America and Europe. The books enable these pastors to tap ancient African wisdom and profit from the devotional reflections of current African writers as they prepare sermons for people interested in the soil from which they were uprooted.

The books might even enlighten a few whites in the West. As a white American who lived in Africa long enough to learn an African language (Sesotho), let me say that African wisdom has never got the respect it deserves in the West. If we ask where Africa has influenced current American culture, the common answer would be in the areas of popular music and professional sports, not in the area of thought and wisdom.

It is not that Africa has no intellectual contribution to make to the world - for from it. The problem is that the West has not yet learned to recognize deep wisdom in the form of concrete proverbs rather than abstract philosophical treatises. Will whites begin to recognize brilliant, deep wisdom in proverbs by reading these books? One hopes so, but even if they do not, it is not a criticism of the books or the writers. The books will rightly be judged by their impact on Africans and people of African heritage.

Much of God's wisdom and guidance for Africans has been given to them in the form of proverbs, and those who are interested in passing on God's word to the next generation should not despise or neglect these gifts. As the Akan proverb says, "You do not point to the ruins of your father's village with the left hand (that is, the hand the Akan associate with uncleanness and contempt).

Stan Nussbaum  
Coordinator  
Colorado, 1996

## **NOTE ON THE AFRICAN PROVERBS PROJECT**

The African Proverbs Project was created and led by an *ad hoc* working group including Stan Nussbaum (American, coordinator), Dan Hoffman (American), Joshua Kudadjie (Ghanaian), John Mbiti (Kenyan), Laurent Nare (Burkinabe), John Pobee (Ghanaian), Willem Saayman (South African). The members were chosen not because of a deep specialist interest in proverbs but because they all see the significance of proverbs in their broader fields, and they all have a broad range of contacts through different networks. The role of the committee was to find and encourage the proverb experts, not duplicate or compete with their work.

The African Proverbs Project was funded principally by The Pew Charitable Trusts of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA, from 1993 to 1996. A national and international philanthropy with a special commitment to Philadelphia, The Pew Charitable Trusts support nonprofit activities in the areas of culture, education, the environment, health and human services, public policy, and religion. Through their grant-making, the Trusts seek to encourage individual development and personal achievement, cross-disciplinary problem solving, and innovative, practical approaches to meeting the changing needs of a global community.

The two organizations under whose umbrella the Project operated are both Christian mission agencies who see this Project as integrally related to their broader work. One is Joint Ministry in Africa, which combines the Africa work of two denominations, the United Church of Christ and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). The other is Global Mapping International, an independent evangelical mission agency with a staff of ten persons who raise their own salary support from a broad spectrum of churches and individuals.

In addition to the **Proverbs for Preaching and Teaching Series**, the African Proverbs Project included the following elements:

**A Consultation on African Proverbs and Theological Education**, Ricatla Theological Seminary, Maputo, Mozambique, March 1995. Papers edited by John S. Pobee, *Proverbs and African Christianity* (forthcoming).

**An Inter-disciplinary Symposium on the African Proverb in the 21st Century**, University of South Africa, Pretoria, October 1995. Papers edited by Willem Saayman, *Embracing the Baobab Tree* (forthcoming 1997 from Unisa Press, Pretoria).

**The African Proverbs Series.** Series Editor, John S. Mbiti. 500 to 1500 proverbs in each volume with translations, explanations, illustrations and index. Proverbs are arranged in similar topical sections in each volume for easy comparison. Writers commissioned by the African Proverbs Project for work on proverbs from Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Ghana, Lesotho, and Uganda.

**"Endangered Proverbs" Collections.** 100 to 300 proverbs in languages where few, if any, proverbs have been previously published with translations. Collectors recruited by the African Proverbs Project and paid per proverb submitted from Burkina Faso, South Africa, Tanzania and Togo.

**Three Annotated Bibliographies:** one on African proverb scholarship (W. Mieder), one on African proverb collections (S. Nussbaum), and one on books and articles on the pastoral use of African proverbs (J. Healey).

**Production of a CD-ROM** called *The African Proverbs CD: Collections, Studies, Bibliographies* (Colorado Springs: Global Mapping International, 1996). The CD included most of the above publications plus reprints of fourteen other proverb collections and seven other tools for proverb research such as:

- (a) **African Languages According to the Ethnologue.** A complete list of African languages with population estimates, locations, variant names, dialects, and linguistic family tree, excerpted from the *Ethnologue* (Dallas: SIL, 1995).
- (b) **Directory of African Proverbs Researchers and Collectors.** Names, addresses, publications, proverbs interests and other biographical information about people who have contributed to the collection and/or study of African proverbs.
- (c) **Statistical Tables and Maps on the Status of Proverbs Collection in Each Language and Country.**

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is with mixed feelings that I present this volume on Bassa proverbs: feelings of pain and joy. I ache for the rapid vanishing away of the hundreds and thousands of Bassa proverbs. This great loss has occurred because no collections and recordings of Bassa proverbs were made prior to the time the imported Government of Liberia arrived and prohibited the public use of all tribal languages, including the Bassa language. This was followed by the introduction of Christianity in a foreign context, and the forbidding of all tribal cultural activities in Liberia for more than a century since then (1822 to the present). Now that almost all of the sagacious and legendary elders have passed away with their oral memories, collecting proverbs at this time in their absence is as difficult as putting a pair of trousers on a snake.

Nevertheless, I believe that a vision to communicate God's message to the Bassa people in their indigenous proverbs was given to a very few of their Christian leaders several years ago. Although the realization of that vision may seem overdue, I am convinced that that vision is God's communication, and, since that vision was given by God, He will fulfill it.

Prophet Habakkuk was in a similar situation of despair like the traditional societies of Liberia. But God broke the silence with this answer to Habakkuk:

This message is about a special time in the future. This message is about the end, and it will come true! It may seem like that time will never come. But be patient and wait for it. That time will come. It will not be late (Habakkuk 2:3).

While a number of obstacles stood in the way at the time to delay the realization

of the vision, the major obstacle being the conflict of cultures in the teaching of the Scriptures, the time has now come. As one writer put it, "contextualization is the sign of the time." (Owanga-Welo 1991). Many of the branches of the Church in Africa today are sterile and decayed. We must look for ways of reviving the decayed church and of overcoming the existing distrust of any African Christians and unbelievers as well, who see the Church as an imported religion. In order to dispel this suspicion of the people, the messengers of the gospel must take the culture of the people into serious consideration, rather than continue to reject it out of prejudice, to the disadvantage of the gospel.

Proverbs reflect the historical experiences of a people, and the wisdom gained from those experiences. The gospel is more effectively presented when it is expressed and practiced in the context of the people. Among the Bassa, as indeed among other African peoples, one of the best vehicles through which the gospel can be communicated is the proverb. This is what contextualization is all about - "putting or understanding something in its proper context," as Owanga-Welo (1991) would put it.

This is why I am full of joy and so thankful to the Lord, that He has graciously enabled me to make this little contribution towards efforts to present the gospel to Africans in their own context.

I should like to acknowledge also a number of people to whom I am greatly indebted. They have helped me to make this project a success.

Rev. Dr. Stan Nussbaum:

Director of the African Bible Guides Project, Selly Oak Colleges;  
Coordinator of the African Proverbs Project; and  
Missionary of the Mennonite Board of Missions, USA.

Dr. Nussbaum must be commended for his God-given vision and concern to bring the message of the Bible closer so that the gospel can reveal itself better to the African. Stan is in the vanguard in our search for affirmation of the African identity. His concern can be explained by this ancient proverb of the Bassa: NYON NI NYEHN NIIN HWEH KE NYON NI DIEH ZIMMIN. (One who hates water cannot eat its fish.) The truth of this proverb is that every African is immersed in his or her culture, just the same way in which fish is immersed in water. Whatever an African does, reflects his or her culture, one way or the other. As one uses the same water to clean and cook the fish, so it is with culture. You may not eat the fish, if you hate its water. Likewise, one who hates African culture cannot in any way work effectively with Africans to teach them love, which is the central theme of Christianity. By bringing this project into being and coordinating it, Dr. Stan Nussbaum has taken into account the relevance and importance of the African's search for the contextualization of the gospel in Africa. Stan has truly put himself in the vanguard of this great search by Africans for their identity. This is an indication of his true love for Africans. He loves our culture and he loves us as well.

Rev. Joshua N. Kudadjie:

Editor of the African Proverbs for Preaching and Teaching Series; and Professor of the Religious Studies Department, University of Ghana.

Rev. Kudadjie paved my way into this intellectual group of writers on African proverbs.

As Series Editor, he laid down very clear guidelines, and not only produced the model which writers in the Series have followed; he also wrote the general Introduction as well as Chapter 2 which we adopted as common texts for all the books in the Series. He has encouraged me all along. I must be grateful to him.

The CEM Bassa Bible Translation Team:  
Man, Cote d'Ivoire.

This team is headed by Pastor Seokin E. Payne with Pastor Robert Glaygbo and Mr. William Boen. These men at the Christian Extension Ministries (CEM) helped as a team and individually, and translated the annotations on the proverbs from English into Bassa.

Elders of Wisdom in Bassaland and Personal Friends:  
I consulted many people many times, and they cooperated with me and helped me in my collection. They are too many to be named here, but they deserve my sincere gratitude.

Fellow authors:

I am very grateful to the many authors whose books I have read, from some of which I have quoted very important passages.

Ms. Mary Vaamar Karnga-Cooper:  
New Jersey, USA.

She facilitated my writing in many ways. Moreover, she bought for me a brand-new IBM electric typewriter and enough office supplies. She must be commended highly.

Mrs. Eileen W. Karnga:  
Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire.

She is the last, but not the least. As we shared the same room for both bedroom and office, she gave up her sleep no later than 2 to 3 a.m. every night. That was a great sacrifice she made for my work, as I continued to write and type. Although I collected the proverbs, she knows their origins and meanings better than I, and she filled me in whenever I got stuck. She is a prayer warrior. There is not a time that she did not fast three days out of every week. She prayed for me daily and for Liberia and for our people in the war zone. She is a faithful Christian woman and a good wife. This book is our testimony of God's grace and glory as we continue to live a refugee life in God.

Jesus looked at me and said: "For without me you can do nothing" (John 15:5c). This verse is my strength in God and in whatever I do. I give God the praise and the glory, for, "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me" (Phil. 4:13).

I acknowledge the great efforts being made by many others to make Christianity part of the African's way of life. This book is just a small contribution to the total effort of making the Christian message take deep root in the African soil - to augment the contribution being made by the use of African choruses, musical instruments and drums, local language Bibles and hymn books, and African church leadership.

It is our prayer and hope that the African church will meet the spiritual, intellectual, moral and emotional needs of Africans, through the use of the rich African proverbs.

## INTRODUCTION

The people of every race or culture have their own modes of communicating among themselves. Some of these modes are the song, art, sculpture, and drumming. But by far the most commonly used mode is verbal language. There are different forms of verbal language; for instance, common language, idiom, secret or esoteric language, and the proverb. This book is concerned with one class of proverbs: traditional African proverbs.

### **General Features of African Proverbs**

Much of the language and thought of Africans are expressed in proverbs. In many ways, African traditional proverbs are just like those of the people of other cultures and races. Like others, African proverbs are short sayings which contain the wisdom and experiences of the people of old. Although there are also long proverbs - which look more like short stories or poems - the overwhelming majority of African proverbs are short, pithy statements.

African proverbs usually have two meanings: the literal or primary meaning, and the deeper or real meaning. The real meaning of African proverbs is not always apparent. This is precisely why they are called proverbs. For instance, the Ghanaian Akan, Dangme and Ga expressions for "to cite a proverb," **bu abe**, means "to bend," "curve," or "twist words," to make them complicated (Yankah 1986). Similarly, the Lugbara (Uganda) term that is used to designate proverbs, **e'yo obeza**, literally means "mixed words," "twisted speech" or "indirect talk" (Dalfovo 1997). The meaning of a proverb is not fixed, and so it can be modified. The user is free to reconstruct a proverb in order to make it appropriate in the particular context in which it is being used. To modify a proverb, one may delete, paraphrase, elaborate or transfer elements in it. The hearer must be witty to interpret and grasp the meaning of a proverb.

Another important feature of African proverbs is that for a proverb to be appropriate when cited, the situation depicted in the primary meaning as well as its deeper meaning must match that of the context and situation to which it is being applied. Take, for instance, the Bassa proverb: *"An elder knows where to locate a crab's heart."* The proverb is pointing to difficult and complex problems whose solution can hardly be imagined. They are like a crab's heart which can hardly be located. Yet in both cases an elder has the solution: from his store of knowledge and experience he can locate a crab's heart; and from his experience and wisdom, coupled with patience and careful scrutiny, he can get to the root of a complex problem and offer solutions. This characteristic of the African proverb and its application calls for a technique that comes with long periods of training and practice, whether formal or informal. Similarly, to understand a proverb correctly is also a task, and calls for discernment; for those who hear the proverbs do not always understand them. This is because the truths and advice expressed in the proverbs are not always stated in plain common language but rather in figures of speech, metaphors and images. Sometimes, things that are alike or opposites are compared and contrasted. One needs to reason and use the imagination in order to get their real meaning (Dzobo 1972).

### **Source and Authority**

In Africa, proverbs are not usually ascribed to any particular individuals, but collectively to the ancestors, the wise men and women of old. In most cases, it is not known who composed a particular proverb. But whether known or not, all proverbs are credited to the elders of old, even if a particular composer is still alive. In many African societies, when a proverb is cited, it is preceded with a statement like, "So said the elders...." This may be a way of according proverbs authority. It is also a way of saying that all the people own the proverbs (Dzobo 1975), and that they contain experience, wisdom, and valid counsel which are to be acknowledged by all. Thus, the collective thought, beliefs, and values of an African people can be discerned from their proverbs.

### **Scope and Content**

There are thousands, perhaps millions, of African proverbs. New ones are still composed, and old ones are adapted or given new meanings to suit new situations. Anyone who is ingenious - that is, one who is creative, observant and has the ability to reflect and deduce a moral lesson from common happenings - can compose a proverb (Dzobo 1975).

African proverbs contain observations gathered from common everyday events and experiences concerning the nature, life and behaviour of human beings as well as those of animals, birds, plants, and other natural objects; and even supernatural objects and beings. Some of the proverbial sayings are statements of historical facts about the people, while others contain information about their culture. For instance, the Ewe proverb, "*When Nôtsie chief sends you to war, you yourself have to find a way of hiding from your enemies*" tells of events in their history some 600 years ago when many Ewes lost their lives in wars that they fought for the chief of *Nôtsie* (an ancient walled city situated in present-day Togo) (Dzobo 1975). A great number of them express their philosophical thoughts, religious beliefs and values. The Akan proverbial saying that "*God pounds fufu for the one-handed person*" is a theological statement of their experience of God's provision, loving kindness and gracious dealings with humankind. Other proverbs reflect the social structure of traditional African societies. For example, there are proverbs that suggest how to deal with elders, children, a spouse and so on, and there are some which indicate the position and role of various members of the society. The Ga proverb: "*When a woman rears a goat, it is a man who slaughters it,*" shows the position and role of the woman in Ga traditional society as a subordinate but indispensable companion and partner of the man. Similarly, the Dangme proverb "*The stream side drinking calabash does not make one die of thirst*" (i.e., it saves one from dying of thirst), shows the importance of women in the created order; for it means that a man who has a wife at home will not die of hunger. At a deeper level, it means that a man finds his complement, his fulfilment in woman, a wife.

A close look at African traditional proverbial sayings shows clearly that the main concerns expressed in the proverbs relate to every aspect of human life. The ultimate purpose of the proverbs is to teach wisdom and moral lessons. Thus they contain, and are used to convey, moral lessons and advice on how to live a good and prosperous life.

The proverbs touch on all conditions of life: wealth and poverty, health and sickness, joy and sorrow; occupations: farming, hunting, fishing, building, trading, and so on; and other kinds of activity: healing, cooking, walking, sleeping, marriage, childbearing, upbringing, etc. There are proverbs which speak about and to all manner of people: kings and citizens, nobles and slaves, women and men, children and adults, apprentices and master craftsmen, and so on.

African proverbs contain observations and good counsel against undesirable vices like anger, backbiting, greed, ingratitude, laziness, lying, pride, procrastination, selfishness, stealing and so forth. The Ugandan proverb, "*Anger killed a mother cow,*" warns against anger, while the South African proverb, "*Horns which are put on do not stick properly,*" condemns hypocrisy and arrogance. Many other proverbs also praise and

advise people to cultivate virtues that promote progress and ensure wellbeing; as for instance, circumspection, co-operation, gratitude, humility, patience, perseverance, prudence, respect and unity. The Igbo proverbs, *"The palm wine tapper does not say everything he sees from the top of the palm tree,"* and *"If the mouth says the head should be beheaded, when it is beheaded, the mouth follows it,"* both teach prudence and the need not to speak just anyhow or say everything one sees or knows.

### **Context and Use**

In traditional African society, one can hardly hear anyone speak a few sentences without citing a proverb. For the initiated, the citing of proverbs comes naturally without any conscious or special effort. This is as true during ordinary conversation as during formal and solemn discourse. However, proverbs tend to be more purposely cited during serious or formal discourse, such as during proceedings of the council of elders, a chief's court, an arbitration, family meetings, or during exhortations on how to live a morally good life.

A cursory examination may suggest that some proverbs contradict others. For example, some proverbs counsel self-reliance, while others counsel community effort. The truth, however, is that in their own contexts and particular situations, each is apt. In real life situations, too, there are paradoxes and apparent contradictions. For instance, in certain situations, the best thing to do is to be silent, while in others, speaking out is the wise thing to do. Thus, although silence and speaking out may appear conflicting when put together, in the appropriate contexts, each is positive. It is no wonder, then, that since proverbs relate to real life situations, they sometimes seem to conflict with each other; but they are only apparent and not real contradictions. This fact underscores the need to use proverbs in the right context and appropriate situation.

It is also important to note that one proverb can have several meanings and can, therefore, be applied to different situations. For instance, the Ga proverb, *"If you want to send a message to God, tell it to the wind,"* can be used in different situations: to teach that God is everywhere; to teach one the correct Ga procedure that if you want to see the chief, you must first see the linguist; or to advise that if you have a bothersome matter that you cannot speak out, you have to tell it to those who can pass it on.

On the other hand, in some cases, many different proverbs teach the same moral lesson, and can, thus, be used for emphasis. The Gas say: *"A kitchen that leaks (or a shed in ruins) is better than a thicket."* The Ewe have a proverb which says that: *"Even a good-for-nothing fellow can carry a pot of palm wine to the funeral."* The Dangme say: *"Mud-water also can be used to quench fire."* All these proverbs teach the same moral lesson, namely, that every person is of some use; therefore, everyone should be given due regard, and people should have a sense of their own worth and be contented with what they are.

African proverbs can be used for several purposes. They can be used for the linguistic analysis of a particular language or dialect. Historical information as well as the thought, customs, beliefs and values of a society can also be obtained through their proverbs. Besides, African proverbs are a literary device used to embellish speech. This is because

many of the idioms of an African language are embedded in its proverbs. As it were, African proverbs are used as sweeteners to communicate effectively. As one Ga writer (E.A. Nee-Adjabeng Ankra 1966) put it, speaking without citing proverbs is like eating soup that has no salt in it. Proverbs are cited to confirm, reinforce or modify a statement; or to heighten and attract attention to a point or message; or simply to summarize a speech. Sometimes, too, they are used to communicate a fact or opinion which it might be impolite or even offensive to state in direct speech or plain language. They are also used to make people appreciate speech, or facilitate understanding, and lead to conviction. As one Yoruba observation has it: "*A proverb is the horse which can carry one swiftly to the discovery of ideas.*"

Although all these uses are important, they are, in fact, means to an end. The ultimate purpose of proverbs is to impart wisdom; teach good moral and social values; warn against foolish acts; provide a guide to good conduct; and to influence people's conduct, and help them to succeed in life.

### **African Proverbs and the Mission of the Church**

African proverbs can be extremely useful and effective for all the things they can be used for, particularly as a tool for teaching moral and social values, and how to conduct oneself successfully in the business of life. They are short and not easily forgettable; they are easy to remember. They are also popular for their humour. Moreover, they provoke vivid images in the mind, such that things that are otherwise abstract and difficult to grasp become relatively easy to understand.

Proverbs have the power to change people's conduct, because the truths portrayed in them are so plain and unchallengeable that those who understand the morals and advice they contain, feel compelled to conduct their lives in the manner prescribed in the proverbs by the wise elders of old.

It cannot be doubted that desiring to live the good life is not enough, for one can know and even will to do good, and still be unable to do it (See Romans 7: 14-25). It is those who accept the gospel of Jesus Christ and have the Holy Spirit in them who have power to do the good. Yet, it is important to note that Jesus Christ who brought this new power to work from within a person, himself also used the method of influencing people from the outside by appealing to their minds and hearts through teaching. In doing this, he used stories and proverbial sayings. There can be no doubt, then, that the present-day Church may attain its goal (which is to make all peoples the followers of Christ and teach them to obey what he has commanded), if it encourages the proper use of proverbial sayings. In using these indigenous proverbial sayings, however, the Church must correct and replace what is not so good in them, and add on from the Scriptures what is more excellent.

At this point in Africa's history when there are cries everywhere for moral and social reform, the use of proverbs in moral education is urgent. The many positive features of African proverbs, such as those cited above, make them most invaluable and unavoidable as instruments of teaching. The Church which has always been interested in

people living the morally good life, must use African proverbs even more earnestly, especially in preaching and teaching. Their use will help immensely to teach the truths of many biblical themes and stories, and to affect the moral, social and spiritual lives of the people for the better; for when a proverb is used correctly, it speaks to the intellect, the soul and the heart - that is, to the understanding, the feelings and the will. (See also Archbishop Trench in Malcolm: 1949.) Over the centuries, African proverbs have successfully done this. They can, thus, be used to great advantage in Christian preaching and teaching.

Joshua N. Kudadjie  
Series Editor

## **PART I**

### **CHAPTER 1**

#### **EMPHASES OF BASSA PROVERBS**

##### **1 Introduction: The People and Their Language**

###### **1.1 Historical Roots of the Bassa**

The story of the roots of the Bassa is preserved in their ancient proverbs. One of those proverbs says: Sodoa soa nyon dabain die kon.(On the old mat is woven the new). This proverb was passed on to me by Elder Geah-Kwui Deputy Sarwah. The Elder looked back to the time of the ancestors and narrated a legend from which the "Old Mat" proverb was taken. The word for "legend" in the Bassa language is "dyuaun-kadyu."

No Bassa Elder would speak a sentence or two without citing a proverb. In this respect, Elder Sarwah is eminent among the Bassa Elders. While Elder Sarwah was searching for information about the origin of the "Old Mat" proverb, he discovered that the "Old Mat" was a seat of authority used solely by the Bassa King. Nobody could weave its replacement or one like it, unless he wove it on the "Old Mat." Traditionally, it is "on the old mat that we weave the new."

The roots of the Bassa were traced by knowing the origin of the "Old Mat" proverb. The Bassa people, according to the legend, were led by their King on the lone "Old Mat" when they migrated from Ethiopia in the 16th century to this part of West Africa, the then "Grain Pepper Coast," known as "Liberia" today. The story continues that the people escaped from the destruction of the 16th century war which broke out between Ethiopia and Egypt. The migration was led by their King, called Suahn Vehnehn, a name meaning "great ape." Later, Suahn Vehnehn was changed to Fannah Boeh Vehnehn, meaning "great man of wisdom."

The King and his people were identified as people from the direction of the sunrise. They travelled from Abyssinia (Ethiopia) and passed through six countries: Sudan, Chad, Cameroon, Slave Coast (Nigeria), Gold Coast (Ghana), and the Ivory Coast (Cote d'Ivoire) before reaching the Grain Pepper Coast. Finally, their "Hook of Leadership" (a "Hook of Leadership" is a supernatural guide for a traditional leader) got stuck in the soil of the Grain Pepper Coast, and suddenly, they stopped by the decree of the King. The "Old Mat" was spread on the ground and the King ordered each family to build a home.

This Bassa legend based on the "Old Mat" proverb is worth accepting to be converted into a written history of the Bassa people of Liberia who have had no previous

written history up to this time. That the legend is based on factual events and real people can be authenticated and substantiated by the following three pieces of circumstantial evidence.

1. *Traditional name:* The original name of the Bassa people was Gor-Nyon Be, meaning, people of the East or people from the direction of the sunrise. The country of Ethiopia mentioned in the legend, is also located in the East.
2. *Historical evidence:* The traditional legend narrates the event of the war which broke out between Ethiopia and Egypt in the 16th century. World history confirms that in the 16th century, Ethiopia and Egypt fought, and Ethiopia was conquered by Egypt. That was the cause of the migration of the Ethiopian Bassa to the Grain Pepper Coast. The Book, Liberia - History of the First African Republic, 1970, by Dr. C. Abayomi Cassell, confirms the 16th century migration of the Bassa from the East, including the Grebo, Bassa, Kru and the Krahn. Cassell concluded that "Those who settled in the Montserrado and Bassa areas became the Bassa Tribe and that a portion of them formed what is known today as the Krahn Tribe. Those who reached the Cavalla River eventually became the Grebo Tribe."
3. *Religious evidence:* The people of Ethiopia are a very religious people. So also are the Bassa people of Liberia; they are involved in Christian activities more than any other ethnic group in Liberia. Grand Bassa, their Country, is rightly described as "Church County."

## 1.2 Literature in Bassa Tradition

The Bassa people were led by the impact of one of their proverbs as oral literature to provoke the desire for education. That particular proverb says: Se-deh-dyuo mon zudueh. Literally, it means, To know nothing is to be foolish. The wisdom of this proverb makes clear the desirability of being informed, and makes compulsory whatever educational system the Bassa have. The heads of family and kinship group are in the vanguard of their cultural school to make sure that all of their children strive for knowledge about people and things, and for wisdom.

Bassa tradition holds that one who is ignorant is likened to a half human being, or to a drone, known in Bassa as Doeh Vun-Mley, which does not make any honey but only a low, monotonous humming or buzzing noise all day long around the bee-hive. As a result of the great impact that the proverb has had on the Bassa people in creating a desire for knowledge, no parent wants to see his or her children become victims of ignorance.

The invention of "Bassa Vah" is the result of this great longing for knowledge. The Bassa Vah was a symbol of communication in the tribe in the days of old. According to oral history, Mr. Di-Wadah invented the Bassa Vah in the early part of the migration. He chewed on green leaves to make marks to represent something for communication. He demonstrated physically the meanings of marks that he had chewed on the leaves to some women of the community. This also marked the beginning of the development of what we call "body language." His movement of arms, eyes, hands, or

head was intended to send a particular message.

The success of the Bassa Vah led to the development of the Bassa Vah Script. Later in the early 1800's, another Bassa man, Thomas Flo Narvin Lewis, appeared on the scene and invented the alphabet of the Bassa Vah Script, which he called "Ehnin Ka Se Fa." Since the invention of the Bassa Va Alphabet by Mr. Lewis is more scientific than the invention of the Bassa Vah by Mr. Di-Wadah, let me briefly state how much Mr. Thomas Flo Narvin Lewis has done to develop the Bassa Vah Script.

Thomas Flo Narvin Lewis was the son of a Bassa Chief named Mahdeh Flo. The Flo family hailed from District No.3 of Grand Bassa County, Liberia, in the Siahn Section of Hwodoa-Zohn Clan. Thomas Flo Narvin was adopted by an American Missionary lady who gave him the name Lewis (family name of the adopted mother). While living in America for many years, he graduated from the Medical College at the Syracuse University in New York, in 1907. He later became a renowned medical doctor. Tom Narvin was the first highly educated son of the Bassa Tribe.

Although the ideographic code of the Bassa language had been documented in Liberia when Dr. Lewis left the country, while he was studying in America, he based his alphabet on the existing ideographic code of the Bassa people. In view of this, Dr. Thomas Narvin Flo Lewis was given the credit as the inventor of the Bassa Script Alphabet of the original Bassa Vah.

The Bassa language is now among the few languages of Liberia which have their own original written script alphabet. The Bassa people can be proud to reverse the proverb from, To know nothing is foolish, to, To know something is wisdom. Although the Bassa language was not approved by the "Elite Government of Liberia," to be taught in school, we are happy and hopeful that a day will come when efforts made by the indigenous learned people of Liberia will be recognized and put to use for the development and benefit of many in Liberia.

Some of the peculiar features of the Bassa language, as compared with other languages of Liberia, worth mentioning are specifically these three:

1. *Language of Nasalization*: Most of the Bassa words are sounded in the nose; for example: to cook is pin, to go is mu, water is ni, to walk is na, I is mu and you is mu, etc.
2. *Language of Tonal Marks*: The seven vowels of the Bassa alphabet have different tonal marks referred to as accents or stresses, to indicate the modulation or regulation of the voice of the speaker. These linguistic tones are:

- |     |                 |                     |
|-----|-----------------|---------------------|
| (a) | Nehin Wudu Dyi  | (High Tone)         |
| (b) | Doeh Wudo Boun  | (Lone Tone)         |
| (c) | Kpa Wudu Dyii   | (Mid Tone)          |
| (d) | Gbiain udu Dyi  | (Slanting Tone) and |
| (e) | Gbenhin Wudu Mu | (Double Tone).      |

3. *Language of its own Original Script:* The Bassa Alphabet has 30 letters including 23 consonants and seven vowels. According to the modulation of the vowel sounds, each vowel repeats itself five times so as to accommodate each of the five tonal marks. Each mark is placed inside each letter of the seven vowels to modulate the voice of the speaker.

After Dr. Lewis had modified and arranged the Bassa Alphabet into a proper alphabetical order, he returned to Liberia in 1910. He opened a school for the Bassa people and taught Bassa as a written language of Liberia to his Bassa people with considerable sense and circumspection, in spite of the negative attitude of the "powers that be" at the time. He selected several key verses in the Bible and translated them into the Bassa language, and taught his people the "way of salvation" up to the time he died in 1935 (allegedly through poisoning) at the age of 55 (1880-1935). His Bassa Script is his legacy, left behind for the Bassa people of Liberia.

Later, after his death, the original Bassa Alphabet was converted into an International Phonetic Alphabet by some western missionaries of the General Association of the Regular Baptist Council (GARBC), to continue Bible translation among the Bassa.  
**ALPHABETICAL CHART**

1. The International Phonetic Alphabet (the 23 consonants):

n k s f m y g d kp j xw x  
 z gb d ch hw t b v h p r

2. Repetition of the five tonal marks in each of the seven vowels:

(a)	High Tone	=	a oh o u e eh i
(b)	Low Tone	=	a oh o u e eh i
(c)	Mid Tone	=	a oh o u e eh i
(d)	Slanting Tone	=	a oh o u e eh i
(e)	Double Tone	=	a oh o u e eh i

3. The Original Vah alphabet (the 23 consonants):

4. The Seven Vowels:

5. A Repetition of the five tonal marks in each of the seven vowels:

=  
 =

And,

### 1.3 **The Beginnings and Nature of Bassa Proverbs**

The wisdom of the Bassa has always been associated with their Elders. Their ability to use experience and knowledge effectively in decision-making arises from their native wisdom. That kind of God-given wisdom which is expressed in wise words is what we call "proverb." It is preserved in proverbs as a legacy from their ancestors.

According to the Bassa Elders, the proverb as wisdom oral literature, was discovered in stories told about events experienced by knowledgeable persons in the community and also in nature. Experiences that old hunters have had with both wild and domestic animals, including birds, were converted into useful proverbs to express or interpret technical issues, hurt feelings, critical decisions, rules and regulations, moral and religious taboos, etc.

Communicating through proverbs is one of the many ways in which Bassa Elders communicate ideas and feelings effectively in coded language. The following are few examples of the many modes of expression used by the Elders for effective communication: proverbs, figures of speech, idioms, music, body language, signals, and truisms.

The depth of the wisdom in proverbs is indicated in one of the ancient proverbs of the Bassa. This proverb is weightier and has more impact when expressed in the Bassa language as, Fonnon-whodo se-hwoehn, than when expressed in the English language as, "Diversity of wisdom." This proverb means that each Bassa proverb contains a multi-wisdom. That is, because of the different experiences that the Elders have had relating to one proverb, many wise lessons and different meanings can be derived from one proverb.

### 1.4 **Definitions of "Proverb"**

In a book on the proverbs of the Zulu of South Africa, (Proverbs and Popular Sayings), collected by James Stuart and edited by D. McK. Malcolm, the authors define a proverb as, "A brief pithy story condensing in witty or striking form wisdom of experience," and "A familiar and widely known saying in epigrammatic form."

Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary defines "proverb" as, "A short sentence that people often quote and that gives advice or tells you something about human life and problems in general."

The Oxford Encyclopedia English Dictionary says a proverb is "a short pithy saying in general use, held to embody a general truth."

The New Lexicon Webster's Dictionary defines "proverb" as "a brief familiar maxim of folk wisdom."

According to the Scriptures, a proverb is figurative language. The disciples of Jesus, for example, appreciated it very much when He spoke plainly without using proverbs (John 16: 29).

Bassa proverbs are like other proverbs, and preserve the wisdom of the Bassa. They are the birthright and heritage of posterity, preserved by the ancestors, and as old as the people. The ancient proverbs are passed on orally from generation to generation through oral history, vocal music, folklore and traditional legends embedded in the memories of the sagacious and legendary Elders, the historians, vocal musicians and the traditional folklorists.

The proverbs, as the wisdom of the people, can be likened to a reservoir, or a water tower that is used for water storage, before the water is supplied to the different parts of a city in different quantities from the same source.

### **1.5 Coverage and Use of Bassa Proverbs**

Now that Bassa proverbs are on the way to becoming written literature, their coverage and use will be enlarged, as it were. In their oral state, the proverbs were limited and were solely the property of the Elders. They were like a law book and wisdom for only the Council of Elders when used from memory to plead cases for their clients; to counsel and console bereaved family members and relatives; teach good character and moral behavior; and warn young men and women in the community to behave properly. Unless one were an Elder or know the Bassa language well, the values in the proverbs were of no use to one.

As some of the proverbs have been collected and become written literature, the use of Bassa proverbs will no longer be limited to Bassa Elders. To this end, a new standard of purpose needs to be carefully considered, since the proverbs can be read and examined by other proverb experts. New guidelines must be given by which improved interpretation of traditional ethics and morals, ideals, and principles of life could emerge. This will make the study of proverbs more inclusive so as to touch on all conditions of life and all manner of people.

When such a new way is open, it will become a challenge to all enlightened men and women, in particular the Bassa, and to all proverb researchers. Then, more of the inherited wisdom of the Bassa, buried in their proverbs, will be unearthed for development, for teaching and learning purposes, and for interpreting the Scriptures in the context of the Bassa people. When that vision has become a reality and the written proverbs of the Bassa have been accepted for use in preaching, teaching and literary works, then the effort would have been truly worth the risk.

### **1.6 Emphases of Bassa Proverbs**

We classify below some of the major themes emphasized in Bassa proverbs. This should give deep insight into, and help in the study and analysis of, Bassa traditional

proverbs.

### 1.6.1 Value of Elders in the Community

The wits in the wisdom of the elders is worthy to be cherished. The value of elders in the Bassa tradition is that they are the foundation of wisdom for each kinship and lineage group and the community as a whole. To disregard and ill-treat an elder, or an aged man or woman, and uproot him or her from the family circle or from the community's affairs, is a great loss. Such a loss may be likened to that of a college professor who purposely throws away his brand new set of The World Book Encyclopedia into a garbage truck; or that of a renowned pastor of a popular evangelical church who willfully burns down his own study where he keeps New Thompson Chain Reference Bible, his New Open King James Version Study Edition of the Bible along with all Bible commentaries.

There are many proverbs that speak about the value of elders in the society. The following are a selected few.

(a) Nyonnon-soa se-deh kon ni, oh konnon dio-dyoya (The old lady might seem to have nothing, yet she has her Dio-dyoya.) The dio-dyoya is the seed of a certain tree, used to cure skin diseases. It is precious because it is uncommon and can only be found with a few aged women.

(b) Nyon-vehnnehn se vonon behin, keh oh dyuo gbaa ka (The Elder is unable to fight, but he has a rich experience for struggles.) This proverb is a response to a young person who thinks that he can beat an old man in a fight. Old people may not be as strong physically as the young men, but they can fight in many ways, and can even sabotage the progress of any young man in life. Victory in the battle of life can be won only by those who have wisdom.

(c) So-gehn ni cheh-eh oh deh xwa (Chicken egg cannot turn its hen over.) This is advice to young people who, because of their book knowledge, claim to know better than their parents.

(d) Nyon-vehnnehn mon mu-dedein bohke. Oh ku dyoh-hwodo. (An elder is a bath-tub; it restrains laughter.) As the bath-tub cannot expose any secret of those who stand naked before it daily, so is the elder in the community, to whom people confide their private problems. An elder knows a lot of secrets but remains silent.

### 1.6.2 Making Good Use of Opportunity

The right and relevant use of opportunity is of paramount importance. There is a class of Bassa proverbs which teach that doing things rightly, decently and in an orderly manner at the earliest opportunity, ensures success in life. The following proverbs represent the many proverbs which teach the advantages of the right and early use of opportunity.

(a) Ni da wouun hwedein ni, oh nyu tonon (Water becomes saliva when it remains in the mouth too long.) Becoming a leader of any organization or group of people, is a privilege and not a right. Some people turn the privilege into their birth right and hand on to it until they have become "dirty saliva" in the mouth of their followers. This proverb urges that opportunity or privilege must be used as quickly and responsibly as possible to avoid its being missed or misused.

(b) Nyon ni po gaa-kon (There is no need to augment a man.) The Bassa believe that to be a man is an opportunity given by God. If you are a man, you must be proud of your manhood and make good use of that opportunity.

### 1.6.3 Teamwork and Confidence

In teamwork, if confidence is created in each member of the team, progress and development follows easily. Members of the Bassa community are interdependent. In such a united community, no one member can do any major work or solve any great problem without the cooperation of other members of the community. The spirit of give-and-take, developed in a group of people, gives them more confidence to be sincere. Although each member has his or her own reservation in the society, he or she must participate in the teamwork of farming, family house dubbing, brushing paths between towns, sharing meal, burying the dead, and so on. The following proverbs teach the spirit of interdependence in the community.

(a) Deeh poein-dyi hweh ke wa kidi tede (Red ants bend a nest only when they are united.) The Bassa learned the wisdom in being united from the ants, and have applied it to improve their living conditions in the community.

(b) Son dyoa do ni fia gbinnin (A single hand cannot coil a boa constrictor.) The boa is a very huge and long snake. When a hunter kills such a snake, it must be wreathed before it can be easily carried into town. One needs more than one hand to coil it, and so it is selfish on the part of a hunter to make the attempt alone when more than one hand is needed.

(c) Monin-monin se kunun kon (There is no remedy against a multi-assault than to surrender to its force.) In a close-knit community, for example, there is no room for any bandit to break into anybody's home. If the attempt is made, only one loud outcry from that house is enough to put any group of bandits under control by the united force of the men in the community. It has been well said that 'in unity there is strength.'

### 1.6.4 Caution, Care and Circumspection

There is probably no greater task than the task of someone who cares for others. The greatest concern of all leaders of Bassa communities is the preservation of life and property of the people in the community. A certain category of proverbs reflect that concern. The following are examples of proverbs that teach members of the community to beware of danger and to prevent it.

(a) M pinin m mion-kpo kopo mu ni, wa zain m se pinin dyede (If you cook yourself in a 'tin can,' people will dish you up with a piece of bamboo stick.) That is, if you treat yourself cheaply, you will be treated cheaply by people. This proverb is a warning to young people who are loose in the community, and who do not care whom they sleep with, where or what they eat, how they talk, whom they talk to, and what they say. They become so cheap that they have no association with good people who can protect their lives and help them to develop.

(b) Behin-behin di pooh-whehn (Only peers eat roasted palm nuts together.) Roasted palm nut is oily, and it is eaten with hands. An elderly person who cares for himself, prefers not to eat roasted palm nuts together with little children who no doubt will mess his clothes with the red palm oil. Those who share their private concerns with children, or get themselves involved with young people's affairs easily put themselves in a shameful mess in the community.

(c) Dyi-te gbe-dyu za hwee-hwee! Pie (A walkabout puppy takes a loud screech from the street back home.) This is a piece of advice to those who like to go walkabout and stay out late in the night. Unless they learn to return home in time, they will be like the walkabout puppy who usually comes home late with a painful screech, hwee-hwee!

(d) Dee ni ba Dyoh-a koun (A stranger does not carry "Dyou-Ma" under his arm.) The Dyou-Ma is a drum with a human-skin-top used for a secret dance in a secret society by members of that society only. As the human-skin-top drum is never to be seen by non-members of the society, it is quickly put away only by a resident who knows where to hide it properly. A visiting guest, although a member of the secret society, would not know where to hide the "sacred drum" if the wicked dancers should be chased by the community's authorities. During such a disturbance, if the drum is detected by the authorities, all members of that society will be arrested to tell whose skin is on the top of the drum. The advice in this proverb is that people who care for their life should stay away from a wicked fraternity.

#### 1.6.5 The Need for Moral Values and Virtues in Society

The need to implant moral values in Bassa communities cannot be over-emphasized. Generally, the emphasis of Bassa proverbs is placed on morality and how to observe rules about right and wrong behavior. The ethical values and virtues of life that Bassa proverbs teach include the following.

(a) Xweh sekeh wodoein sonmon keh (How then can a snake give birth to a worm?) The proverb is talking about fearlessness. When a child who was born in a courageous and diligent family is cowardly, lazy and stupid, then this proverbial question is asked to caution the weak child.

(b) Nooh-dyueh nyinnin-kpodo ni boa-dyi (The faeces of a stubborn child is not big.) This proverb talks about stubbornness. One of the ways to teach a stubborn child a lesson is to reduce his or her daily meal, or, sometimes, to let him or her go hungry for a day or two. The stubborn child will have no need to visit the toilet when he or she has not eaten

enough because of his or her stubbornness. That child will soon learn the lesson when he or she is hungry.

(c) M dyi koeh chehn-ehn dyuo ni, m dieh piuu (If you know how to butcher an ant, you will eat its liver.) This is a proverb about being patient. Patience is as delicate as butchering an ant to find its liver. A person who is able to control his feelings so that he does not get annoyed even in situations which other people would find frustrating, is likened to one butchering an ant to find its liver. Such a person will win victories.

(d) Duun-ku-nyon ni se de (No diligent person can remain in poverty.) This proverb praises the success of hardworking people and advises others to be hardworking.

### 1.6.6 Causation and Natural Events in Society

Events in nature teach the truth of cause and effect. In Bassa tradition, it is believed that whatever happens to anybody in life, or to the community in which they live, has happened has a cause. Given that cause, there should be the result, just as has happened. If anyone should go against the law of nature, he shall surely be in trouble with nature. Likewise, if anyone should go against the moral law or community values, he shall find himself in trouble with his fellow human beings. Some of these issues are addressed by the following Bassa proverbs.

(a) Pee-nyuehn ni se hwio xwadaun. This proverb says: Night must come to end the pleasures of the day. This proverb means, among others, that just as everybody must go home when the night comes, so also something that is useful to the community can be brought to an end by something or someone not so worthy.

(b) Dibii ni wodoehin ke oh ni hwoh xweh (Whatever is born by a black deer cannot resemble the xweh deer.) It will be against the law of nature if a black deer should give birth to a xweh deer; for the two are different.

(c) Mon nyu m min-onum xweh se dyodoun zaum kanma (To bury one who causes his own death is not difficult.) In Bassa tradition, funeral ceremonies are very expensive. But when one causes his own death, the body could be thrown away with no blame. A person is given what he deserves.

### 1.6.7 Preparation for the Future

Concern for the future is optional in Bassa tradition. The future is very uncertain but this does not stop people planning for tomorrow's necessities of life. The following proverbs alert people to prepare for the future.

(a) Nyon se-dyuo ke zon-zon (The day dawns when one is unaware of it.) No day can dawn on anyone who has not gone through the night, or else he or she cannot expect to see the sky grow light after the night. Day light will come, but one must first pass through the night.

(b) Mon kon zehn-in-je ni kpannaan giieh (I scraped at redwood for you to become red.) Many parents who are distressed by the ingratitude of their children whom they love above all things, use this proverb to express great disappointment, and also to caution the younger ones.

In the days of old, redwood was the most valuable commodity of the Bassa people. To fell those hard redwoods with hands using domestic tools like cutlasses and axes, was a very hard labor, but one had to do it in order to ensure a good future for one's posterity.

#### 1.6.8 Hope in Fatalism and Uncertainty

Bassa tradition teaches that God does not eat or take back what He has set aside for His children. The Bassa believe that if one is destined by God to be rich, he will be rich, come what may; if to be poor, he will be poor. Thus, many of the Bassa are committed fatalists in the life of uncertainty. The following proverbs illustrate this attitude.

(a) Hwehn-hwa da, nyon ni dye wanan-deh dyii zieh. This proverb is taken from the crow which says: No one knows from whence cometh bugs in the air. With this uncertainty, the crow keeps its mouth open all the time, waiting for flies to fly around in its direction for its food.

(b) Wodo-wodo mon ni dukpa, oh ni so-pehn-nain. This proverb means: Blood relationship is a river gulf of ages; it is unmovable by anything.

(c) Niehn dehbeh nyon mueh, pa nyon bidi tehbeh mu. The English equivalent of this proverb is: Water enters your bottle when it loves you. That is, the power of love is absolute, and it is never forced on anybody. That which is meant to be yours will come your way.

#### 1.6.9 Complacency and Indifference

Complacency and indifference towards others indicate selfishness. Some members of the Bassa community are pleased with themselves and do not think that there is any reason to worry or do anything about a situation which concerns others in the same community. The following are examples of proverbs that are used to teach lessons about selfish behavior and indifference towards others.

(a) M dehbeh-eh baun-baun muin, m behdeh sein mu (Being greedy for more, you can miss all.) The Bassa tradition frowns on those who scrounge for everything in the community, without taking thought for anyone else.

(b) Kpe-ji ni vonin gannan (A leopard of authority never fights by strength.) In other words, one who thinks that he has everything needs not exert any physical force to get what he already has.

(c) Banan se-muge (Wealth is not discriminatory.) In other words, a gold merchant, for example, cannot envy a rich farmer. All that he knows is that he is a rich man, likewise the rich farmer. Both of them are only concerned with their wealth, without discriminating against each other.

#### 1.6.10 Optimism and Pessimism

The battle between optimism and pessimism with respect to the future development of life is very tough. People living in a community do not always have the same opinion with regard to future plans of the community. Neither do they have the same hope for the future. Some are certain and hopeful for the future development of the community and its people, while others are doubtful and think that the plans for the future will be unsuccessful. In such situations, proverbs such as the following are used to promote optimism, and to caution people about being too optimistic.

(a) Hwidii-de-gbea ni kpa kaunka (A hopeful crab basket (i.e., trap) can fail to catch the intended crab.) This proverb is a piece of advice against placing excessive hope in someone or in something. There can be no absolute hope in any human being. It is only in God that there is unfailing hope.

(b) Nyehn-bun wonon hweh ke gbeeh pehn bo (A dog sleeps by the fireside only when it is warm there.) The dog lies by the fireside in the hope that someone would make the effort to keep the fireplace warm.

(c) Gedepooh faa dyueh wonon bedeeh mu po-deh (The God who split His child's mouth, has something to put in it.) Every member of the Bassa community is optimistic about God's grace to provide food for him or her.

#### 1.6.11 Privacy of Family Matters

In Bassa tradition, family matters are handled with great care and privacy. Knowing the importance of these family matters, a specific class of proverbs is set aside to teach people to be careful with family secrets. The following are just a few examples.

(a) Hwehn sein se hwie-dyi sehin hwehn (Not every bunch of palm nuts is chapped in the road.) In the Bassa tradition, only bunches of good palm nuts are chapped in the road so that travellers would pick good palm nuts and take them along. Pleasant family affairs may be discussed in public but not unpleasant ones.

(b) Maa se choh-de bede (No woman has an Adam's apple.) Some Bassa men do not confide their private matters to women. Women, they say, do not have Adam's apples to keep down secret matters at the back of their throats. (Some Bassa men are making efforts to modify this belief and attitude to reflect the international mood and the dignity of women.)

(c) Nyon ke wudu-dyu ni po-deh gaun. This proverb counsels care in the presence of

a talkative child. It means: Do not seal your carton of secrets in the presence of a talkative child. A talkative child does not know the value of secrecy.

#### 1.6.12 Human dignity in Bassaland

The Bassa put great premium on human life. They express this in many ways and in many areas of their life. When a person dies, they fast and wail and cry with tears of bitterness. When a child is born, especially if it is a baby boy, there is a lot of merry-making to welcome the new baby. When they have a visitor, they go to great lengths to entertain the guest. In contrast to the isolated acts of a few wicked individuals, the generality of the Bassa people fight to defend human dignity.

There are a number of proverbs that demonstrate the concern of the Bassa for the dignity and value of human beings. The following are just a few taken from that category.

- (a) Daa-maa se dyu kon ni, oh gbeh-in-gbe (A barren woman rears a dog to represent her child.) In other words, she will take her relative's children for her pets.
- (b) Xwada se kpooh kon, keh chudi-meh-nehehn be nyuan xwada-kpooh keh (Unless there are shrubs, there can be no jungle.) In other words, it is people who give power and create wealth, yet people can be without power and wealth. That is, power and wealth do not determine the value of people.
- (c) Van-an se m bada hwah oh gbeh ke m bada de (A billy goat has beaten me but its horns cannot beat me again.) That is, he cruel leadership and wicked deeds of men will not be permitted to be perpetuated by their successors. People will fight to gain their dignity and freedom.

#### 1.6.13 Warning against Immoralities in Society

The Bassa are very sensitive to criticism, especially those in leadership positions. They do not tolerate the practice of any immorality that may lead to criticism of the community or the leaders. As such, the habitual practice of vices like dishonesty, greed, hypocrisy, ingratitude, pride, sexual promiscuity and stealing are condemned with vigor. The following proverbs show that the Bassa dislike such evil habits.

- (a) Wudu se widi (Words are not money to be spent.) This proverb is about ingratitude. Some people are so ungrateful and so mean that they would not utter even one word of thanks for a good turn done to them - as if words are as scarce as money.
- (b) Gan-an-dyu ke oh du-xwee behin-dyi. This proverb says that, It is more compatible for a little horn to have a little sound like "du-xwee" than to have the sound of a bigger horn like "du-xwuu." It is a deception when little people begin to practice bigness.
- (c) Bodooh-zoo gba ni pa (The school of an arrogant principal is unpopular.) This proverb advises against pride.

(d) Cheh-cheh-bunehn zi bi dyiin (The hasty rat misses its hole.) This proverb talks about the risk that one takes for being in haste. When a rat has missed its hole, it becomes the target of children for their meat. Similarly, people who are in unnecessary haste put themselves at risk.

(e) Hwodo-nyin-niin-nyon nyuehn ke nyon daba monon wuduun (The unusual appetite of a greedy farmer can cause another farmer to abuse rice.) This proverb is against personal greed for food. Although rice is the staple food of the Bassa people, the lust for it can damage its value.

(f) Vidia-vehnnehn jada bodoa. This proverb speaks about the behavior of hardhearted or tough people who think they can do anything they like, or that they can withstand anybody in the community. The literal translation is: Big cutlass breaks the cutlass. In other words, a farmer who has a big cutlass may try to fell a big tree with it, or strike it against any stick; but pretty soon, he will find himself with a broken cutlass.

(g) Gboun-boa se nyonnon-vehnnehn jueh. This proverb is about hypocrisy. Literally it means: Having a big hip does not bestow on one the position of being the head wife of the chief.

(h) Mon fooh-keh, mon-kon meh-ehn kannadyi (You, being lazy, have healthy guts.) This proverb frowns upon a lazy man who has a big appetite. Idleness is incompatible with living in a community of industrious farmers.

#### 1.6.14 Initiative and Self-effort

Every society needs responsible men and women in order to progress. It is also important to have people with initiative and determination who make self-effort rather than depend on others. The Bassa appreciate and encourage such virtues, as the following proverbs show.

(a) Nyon ni di nyon mue-do bii dehin-deh (One cannot eat a delicious meal for another.) Eating for yourself is a true mark of independence.

(b) Nyon meon niin bu nonmn win-in sun-ehnin (It is pleasant to scratch around your own anus.) That is a sign of being independent, for you do not need anyone to help you scratch around your own anus. You need not wait for other people to do things for you.

(c) Deh na-nyon dyeeh hwede-nyon ni dye-de (The sight seen by the traveler is not the sight seen by the non-traveler.) The personal experience of a traveler is his or her personal treasure.

#### 1.6.15 Concern for Community Welfare

The testimony that a good leader can give that all is well with the people in his community is demonstrated by their healthy outdoor activities, healthy appearance, healthy skin, healthy appetite and healthy body. The following proverbs show the

concern for the well-being of the people.

(a) Dyi-kan-naan dee ke oh zi banan-dyi. The proverb says: To be healthy is sweeter than to be rich.

(b) Hwinon dyeeh gbanan zaa (The tribal doctor who diagnoses a case must treat it.) A healthy community must have some trusted herbalists to care for the health of the people in the community.

#### 1.6.16 Knowledge of Divine Care

Although non-Christian Bassa people strongly believe in the intervention of their ancestors in time of trouble, they know the God Almighty and acknowledge His blessings through the ancestors. Knowing very well that the God Almighty cares for them, they call Him "The Big God" or Gii Vehnnehn. Some of their proverbs about God relate to His divine caring attributes. The following are examples:

(a) Gedepooh ni zi-kpodo. This proverb is about the justice of God. It says, God never passes on the side of injustice. "My God will see you," for example, is one of the major curses that the Bassa would pronounce upon someone who has done them an injustice. Sometimes their God does "see" the evil doers with some punishment.

(b) Gedepooh ni nyi nyon gon-on hweh ke nyon ni mon-on kpa dyi (When God gives you a "never mind" best, you dare not ask for its mitigation.) God's best to anyone is better than anything else.

(c) Ga! Mohn a dein kohn-mohn gboh (Agony, it is by you our wealth began.) The word ga is pregnant with meanings. It means agony, suffering, poverty, sweat, toil, pain, tears, or even blood. The word kohn-mohn means wealth, riches, affluence, prosperity, or resources. This proverb teaches that sometimes out of evil, comes good. The Christian faith supremely demonstrates this truth as an aspect of God's love. Out of Christ's suffering and death, humankind has been offered victory over death and eternal life. The Bassa also know in their traditional life experiences, that good can come out of evil.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **EMPHASES OF BIBLICAL PROVERBS**

#### **Introduction**

Proverbs and proverbial sayings have been used in both the Old and New Testaments. They can be found in various books of the Bible - for example, in Ezekiel 16:44 ("Like mother, like daughter."); Ezekiel 18:2 ("The parents ate the sour grapes, but the children got the sour taste."); 2 Peter 2:22 ("A dog goes back to what it has vomited."). However, the best known is the collection of proverbs in the Book of

Proverbs and some in Ecclesiastes. Jesus also used extensively in his teaching some kind of proverbial sayings, commonly called parables.

Apart from the parables of Jesus which are usually long, and a few other long ones in the Book of Proverbs, the proverbs used in the Bible are short, easily remembered statements. They contain truths gathered from life's experiences. Examples of the long parables are: the parable of the unforgiving servant (Matthew 18: 21-35), the parable of the tenants in the vineyard (Matthew 21: 33-46), and the parable of the talents (Matthew 25: 14-30). There are also a few fairly long proverbs in the Book of Proverbs; for instance, 6: 6-11: the ant and the sluggard; 24: 2-6: the vineyards of a lazy man.

### **The Sources of Biblical Proverbs**

In their present form, the bulk of biblical proverbs have been ascribed to specific individuals; namely, King Solomon (Proverbs 1:1), Agur (Proverbs 30:1), the mother of King Lemuel (Proverbs 31:1), and Jesus Christ (Matthew 13: 1-3).

In Bible times, proverbs were composed by wise men, and were widely used in Israelite society and among other ancient peoples. King Solomon, for example, acclaimed to be wiser than the wise men of the East and Egypt - indeed, acclaimed to be the wisest of all men - is said to have composed three thousand proverbs (1 Kings 4: 29-33, Ecclesiastes 1: 1; 12:9).

Solomon and the other composers of proverbs formulated their proverbs from life's experiences. These experiences were based on their observation of human life and behaviour, animals, birds, reptiles, and fish (1 Kings 4: 33). Solomon is said to have been given his unusual wisdom and insight by God himself (1 Kings 4: 29).

From the parables of Jesus - which are a kind of extended proverbs - four sources can be discerned:

- (i) observations from the world of nature: for example, the parable of the sower (Mark 4: 1-9); the parable of the seed growing secretly (Mark 4: 26-29);
- (ii) knowledge of familiar customs of everyday life and events: like the parable of the yeast (Matt. 13: 33); the parable of the ten virgins (Matt. 25: 1-13);
- (iii) from well-known events in recent history: e.g., the parable of the high-ranking man about to be made king but who was not liked by some of the citizens, and who gave gold coins to his servants to trade with (Luke 19: 12-27); (historians have identified this person to be Archelaus, son of Herod the Great); and
- (iv) from normal probable events, as in the parables of the labourers in the vineyard (Matthew 20: 1-16); the prodigal son (Luke 15: 11-32), and the unjust judge (Luke 18: 2-8).

### **The Form, Structure and Style of Biblical Proverbs**

As has already been stated, some of the proverbial sayings in the Bible are rather extensive. But most of them are short. The Hebrew word for "proverb" comes from a word which means "to be like." Thus, often in the Book of Proverbs, the message of a proverb is given by comparing two things and showing how they are similar in some respect. For example, "An idea well-expressed is like a design of gold, set in silver." (Proverbs 25: 11), or "People who promise things that they never give are like clouds and wind that bring no rain." (25: 14).

Another style commonly used in Proverbs is that of contrast, showing the difference between two things. This is common in chapters 10-15. For example, "A gracious lady is respected, but a woman without virtue is a disgrace" (11: 16), or, again, "Sensible people keep quiet about what they know, but stupid people advertise their ignorance" (12:23).

Sometimes conditional statements are used. For instance, "If you repay good with evil, you will never get evil out of your house" (17: 13), and "Get good advice and you will succeed; don't go charging into battle without a plan" (20: 18).

Another feature is the use of parables, such that behind what seems to be one plain truth lies another, deeper or more general truth. For instance, the proverb, "Never eat more honey than you need; too much may make you vomit" (Prov. 25: 16), is saying something true about honey. But it is also a general warning not to indulge in too much pleasure, lest one becomes fed up or end up in disgrace.

Similar styles are used by Jesus in his parables. The kingdom of heaven is as invaluable as a piece of land with hidden treasure, describing the need to sacrifice everything else in order to possess it (Matthew 13: 44); and if you want to enter the kingdom of God, you must not defer the decision to accept the invitation, as portrayed in the parable of the wedding feast (Matthew 22: 1-4).

### **Purpose of the Proverbs**

The Book of Proverbs is quite clearly a guidebook to successful living, especially to young people, as the opening verses declare:

*Here are proverbs that will help you to recognize wisdom and good advice, and understand sayings with deep meaning. They can teach you how to live intelligently and how to be honest, just, and fair. They can make an inexperienced person clever and teach young men how to be resourceful. These proverbs can even add to the knowledge of wise men and give guidance to the educated, so that they can understand the hidden meanings of proverbs and the problems that wise men raise. (Proverbs 1: 2-6).*

The one who heeds the voice of wisdom as revealed in the proverbs, and avoids the temptations listed, is assured the rewards of long and pleasant life, wealth, honour and happiness (Proverbs 3: 16-17).

## **The Most Emphasized Themes**

We summarize the teaching on nine of the most emphasized themes in biblical proverbs. We have limited the sources to the Book of Proverbs and the Parables of Jesus. The facts stated and observations made in the themes are truths that must be made known to all who desire knowledge about life. The instructions and advice given contain basic unchanging principles which, if heeded, can make one wise and guide one to live an acceptable and successful life; for they emphasize wisdom, understanding, insight, intelligence, discipline, honesty, justice, righteousness, goodness and fairness.

### **1 God**

For the Hebrew, like other ancient people, nothing can be more real than God. To handle things properly and succeed in life, one must understand the nature and ways of things, and the universal laws that operate behind them. Such understanding comes only from God, the maker of all things. That is why the Hebrew wise man declares from the very beginning of the discourse on successful living, that "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Proverbs 1:7). That is the very first step in successful living. To fear God is to remember him and show proper regard for him. A person who wishes to do that, is advised, as it were, to practise the presence of God, not only sometimes or in some things only, but in all things and at all times. If one is thus conscious of God, relying not on his or her own thoughts, but trusting God with all his or her heart - at home, work, in politics, etc., - God will show him or her the right way (3:5-6). Thus all he or she does will be according to God's will, and, since it is God's will that in the end prevails (19:21), the one who relies on God will succeed.

If a person has experienced how reliable God is, he would avoid doing anything that could spoil his relationship with God, such as lying, disowning or disgracing God. He would pray constantly that God may deliver him from any conditions of life that could lead to such denial or dishonour, as for example, extreme riches which would make him proud; or extreme poverty that might make him steal (30:7-9). So his prayer would be, "give me only as much food as I need" (30:8).

Another important truth that the ancient Hebrew wise man learnt is that a nation without God's guidance is a nation without order; but happy is the one who keeps God's law (29:18). How true, and how much this counsel needs to be heeded today, both in the lives of individuals and of nations!

### **2 The Fool**

If there is one person who is to be pitied most in life, it is the fool. Going by the description of the Hebrew wise man, a very large number of people in the world are fools - including some of the world's leading scholars, politicians, businessmen and women, and even religious leaders. Among the many characteristics of the fool are the following. He is mentally weak and easily misled (1:10), morally irresponsible and refuses discipline (1:22-32). He has no regard for truth and is satisfied with his own opinion (14:8), does not search for wisdom but speaks nonsense without much thought (15:2, 14);

he is proud and dislikes correction and advice (15:12). He is also a fool who is impatient, quarrelsome (12:16; 20:3) and bent on doing evil (17:12). Above all, a person who rejects the Lord is a fool (1:29), for as the Psalmist observes, "the fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.'" (Psalm 53:1-3).

Because of his very nature and his conduct, the fool has nothing good to offer (14:7), and is not liked because of his bad influence, as for instance, in bringing grief and bitter regrets to his very parents (10:1; 17:25).

Just as the fool's greatest vice is rejecting God, so also his greatest punishment for his folly is that God gives him up and has no use for him (3:34). Since he neither gets on with people nor finds favour with God, the fool cannot know true success in life.

### 3 Various Warnings

There are many warnings not to do things that can destroy one. Four of them are particularly to be noted. Among them is the warning against joining thieves (1:8-19). Those who attack and kill and rob others for riches or for the fun of it, "are setting a trap for themselves, a trap in which they will die" (1:18), for "robbery always claims the life of the robber" (1:19).

There are also strong warnings against adultery in chapters 5 and 6:20 to 7:27. One is warned to stay away from another man's wife, no matter how beautiful she may be (6:25) or how sweet her lips or smooth her kisses, for they lead to nothing but death (5:3-6). Adultery, experience has shown, is as dangerous as carrying fire against one's chest, or walking on hot coals, and always leads to suffering (6:27-29). A man who commits adultery will lose not only his wealth (5:10; 6:26), but also his honour (5:9,14; 6:33), and his very life (5:9; 6:34-35; 7:26-27). For this reason, one is strongly advised to keep to one's wife alone, and to be completely satisfied with her alone (5:15-19).

Another warning is against laziness, for it leads to ruin (24:31-32). The lazy person is known by his many bad habits. He does not start things early but keeps postponing (6:9-10), and when he starts something, he does not finish it (19:24). Because lazy people only think about what they want but do not work for it, they are ruined, and remain helpless and in want (13:4, 21:25-26; 24:31-32). Such people are advised to learn from the way ants live: not waiting to be told what to do, but taking the initiative to plan ahead, work hard while it is possible, and save up for the time of need (6:6-8).

The final warning to note is that against deceit which includes: lying, being untruthful and unreliable, disloyalty, making false promises, trickery, hypocrisy, misleading others, and insincere talk that hides what you are really thinking. The experience of the wise has shown without mistake that those who cultivate such evil habits do not get very far in the end; for the Lord God hates such habits (6:1-5, 12-19). Therefore, those who do them end up in destruction; for they are caught in their own traps, and get crushed by the landslides that they themselves start (26:17-28).

In numerous proverbs, the one who desires life is advised to refrain from these evils and, instead, follow the path of wisdom and righteousness wherein is life and success.

#### **4 Wisdom**

In a sense all the themes of Proverbs are about wisdom. Yet, the theme of wisdom is treated in a special and detailed way in chapters 1-9. No one can go through life successfully without wisdom, hence the call of wisdom to all (1:20f). Wisdom promises many virtues, including understanding, knowledge, learning, discretion and wise dealing. Through these, one would steer through life and find security, treasures, moral uprightness, etc. (chapter 2) and life itself (4:10; 8:35).

From the observations of the wise men of old, anyone can obtain wisdom, provided he or she is willing to depart from evil (8:13) and the company of ignorant persons (9:4-6), while devoting oneself to wise teachings. If one desires to be wise, one must be determined and teachable (9:9), and accept advice and criticism (13:10; 17:10), especially God's correction (3:11f). But, although training, instruction and discipline can yield wisdom, the real source and ground of wisdom is God - hence the declaration that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (2:6). He who seeks wisdom, then, must first seek God.

#### **5 Friends and Good Neighbours**

God made us human beings to live in community. For community life to be possible, it is necessary, among other things, to have neighbours and friends. But what sort of friend or neighbour? Proverbs gives a detailed description of who may be called a friend. A friend is one who is kind, generous, truthful and reliable (27:10). He would not do anything that would hurt a neighbour (3:29) or spread news of a misunderstanding (25:8-9). He would be silent rather than criticise (11:12) or condemn anyone (14:21). A good friend has tact, knowing when to be close and when to keep his distance; when to say "yes" or "no" (3:27-28); 6:1-5); he does not over-stay his visit (25:17); he knows when a joke is going too far (26:18-19); and he would not do anything that would be inconvenient to a neighbour (27:14).

Besides all this, the good friend must be aware that friendships can be broken and neighbourliness spoilt by bad habits like gossip and doing the wrong thing. Accordingly, he avoids these (16:28; 17:9).

#### **6 Words**

By word God created the universe. By word Christ healed the sick, raised the dead, and cursed the fig tree. Life in community is hardly possible without words; for through them we communicate and even put our ideas in the minds of other people. With them we praise and pray to God. Such is the power of words that in Proverbs, three of the seven things which the Lord God hates and cannot tolerate have to do with the wrong use

of words: lying, evil thought and false witness (6:16-19).

Since words can be used so powerfully for good or ill, the wise men of the ancient near east warned people of their power, and counselled people to use them aright. They advised that one's words must be few, calm and honest. For "the more you talk, the more likely you are to sin" and so the wise keep quiet (10:19). "A gentle answer quietens anger" (15:1), and "Patient persuasion can break down the strongest resistance and can even convince rulers." (25:15) "A good man's words are a fountain of life" (10:11), and a source of wisdom (18:4), while wisely spoken words can heal (12:18). When words are wrongly used by evil and godless people, they can ruin a person (11:9); when used thoughtlessly, they can wound as deeply as any sword (12:18).

Experience has shown, however, that for all their power for good or ill, one needs more than just words to live a good life. For mere words cannot replace hard work (14:23), nor can lies change the truth (26:23-28).

All that Proverbs says about words can be summarized in Paul's advice: "Do not use harmful words, but only helpful words, the kind that build up and provide what is needed, so that what you say will be good to those who hear you." (Ephesians 4:29).

## 7 **The Family**

The Hebrew wise men of old recognized the importance of the family as the basic unit of society. As such, they stressed the need for it to be united, for faithfulness within it and for good training of children.

For a family to be good, marriage is to be monogamous and permanent, and couples are to be faithful to each other (5:15-23; 2:16-22). Sexual sin within marriage is evil and dangerous, leading to disgrace and even death (5:9-23), 6:26-35). A husband must love and be faithful to his wife (5:15, 19), while a wife must be generous, good to her husband and contribute to his good standing in society (31:10f).

It is important for parents to speak with one voice and teach what will improve their children's character - such that the children will pay attention to them (1:8-9). Training must begin from early childhood (22:6; 13:24), and is best if it combines both discipline (i.e. the rod, or punishment) and gentle but firm direction (1:9; 13:4; 22:15).

On their part, children are urged again and again to obey their parents and respect them (1:8-9; 4:1), for such obedience is blessed with long and prosperous life (3:2).

Family members and relatives should be helpful and loyal to each other (17:17; 18:24).

Even though sometimes, some children refuse to learn and are disobedient, and some parents also do not give the right training or set a good example, if parents and children follow the advice of the sages of old, as presented in Proverbs, the quality of life

in the modern world should be far better than it is now with all the violence, immorality and lawlessness that abound.

## 8 **Life and Death**

Another theme emphasized in Proverbs is that of life and death. The words "life" and "death" are used both in their ordinary and figurative senses. Thus, "life" means both living here on earth and a good quality of life. "Death" refers to the physical event of dying, i.e., the end of one's earthly life as well as to a state of conflict in life. In whichever sense one takes it, mature opinion is that all should seek life and avoid death.

If one desires to live and live long, then the way is to be obedient and seek wisdom (3:2; 4:10; 9:11). There are certain conditions and styles of life which add quality to life. For example, close observation has shown that one who finds wisdom finds life (8:35). So also, peace of mind (14:30), honest earning and avoiding bribery give long life (15:27). Again, it is good to be in the favour of those in authority, for that yields blessing, just as clouds give needed rain in spring time (16:15).

On the other hand, certain conditions and experiences are as bad as dying, for people in those states of life have gone astray and missed the way to true life. Consequently, they are in conflict. Such is the case, for example, with the person who is wicked (5:22-23), or has not found wisdom or who hates wisdom (8:36). One can save a child from death and going astray from true life, by timely discipline (23:13-14).

We can escape death and enjoy real life, if we heed these observations and counsels.

## 9 **The Kingdom of God**

Outside the ancient Wisdom books of the Old Testament (Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes), the most concentrated collection of proverbial sayings in the Bible can be found in the Parables of Jesus, recorded in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. There, the major and single theme is the Kingdom of God. We conclude this survey of emphases of biblical proverbs and proverbial sayings with a brief look at these parables.

The collection of Jesus's teachings known as the Sermon on the Mount, ends with a parable of two house builders. One is a fool, for he built on sand, and his house collapsed. The other is a wise person, for he built on rock, and his house survived the storm and the flood (Matthew 6: 24-27). Hearing and obeying the teachings of Jesus is like building on rock; it is wisdom and life; while hearing but not obeying the teachings of Jesus is foolishness and death. To Jesus, the wisest thing a person can do is to seek and get into the Kingdom, and the most foolish thing to do is to remain outside it (See Parable of the Ten Virgins, Matthew 25:1-13).

The parables of Jesus teach about a dimension of life that is higher than physical earthly life, or even a good quality of it. They teach about eternal life - life with God,

which is the truest life of all; that is life in the Kingdom of God.

When Jesus talked about the Kingdom of God, he did not mean any physical area on earth. Rather, he meant a spiritual realm. In that kingdom, God is the ruler, and his will is done by his subjects (Matthew 6:10); his power is experienced and his Holy Spirit destroys the works of Satan (Luke 11:20). Those who are members of the kingdom have God's Spirit who gives them power to live lives that are noble, righteous, godly, peaceful, joyful, and so on (Romans 14:17; Galatians 5:22-25, etc.)

Jesus taught that belonging to this Kingdom is the most important thing. Therefore, one should be prepared to give up everything else in order to get into it. (See parables of the Hidden Treasure and the Pearl in Matthew 13: 44-45). The sacrifices that one will have to make may include habits that give benefits but which are ungodly; or a position of authority; or riches, etc. (Matthew 19:16-21; Luke 3:10-14,18; Acts 2:38).

Above all, Jesus revealed that he himself is the one whom the Father has sent to bring the Kingdom to us (Matthew 21:33-46; John 3:16; 4:25-26). He is also the way to God the Father (John 14:6). If a person believes in Jesus and obeys him, that person is abiding in Jesus, and God himself will work in that person to enable him or her to will and to live the kind of life that pleases God (Phi.2:13). This is the good and truly successful life that both African and biblical proverbs counsel. To live in Jesus, then, is to fulfill the counsels in the proverbs.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **THE GOSPEL AND BASSA PROVERBS**

In this chapter, we shall discuss the connection between biblical wisdom and the proverbial wisdom of the Bassa. The tales of famous story tellers and parables of community Elders of Bassa society have a link with proverbial wisdom. The use of proverbs is part of the oral tradition that has been used for countless ages.

It is a great revelation at this time to identify the proverbs of the Bible with those of the Bassa. "The proverbs of the Bible are a form of African philosophy, wise sayings that speak to the relationship between life's daily events and God." (See *Amazing Facts on the African Presence in the Bible*, p.18).

To have wisdom is to be on the path to true success. Regarding the meaning of "wisdom," Kenneth D. Boa, author of the article "Visual Survey of the Bible," says that "wisdom is the key to a life of beauty, fulfilment, and purpose (Proverbs 3: 15-18). Wisdom is the skill in the art of living life with every area under the dominion of God. It is the ability to use the best means at the best time to accomplish the best ends."

Regarding the question of how we can pursue wisdom, Boa further says that "the treasure of wisdom rests in the hands of God. Since it comes from above (Proverbs 2: 6; cf. James 3: 17), we cannot attain it apart from Him."

In response to the question as to what the conditions are for attaining wisdom,

Boa comes out, again, strongly with this answer, that "true wisdom can only be gained by cultivating the fear of the Lord (Job 28: 28; Psalm 86: 11; 111: 10; Proverbs 1: 7; 9: 10). To fear God is to have an attitude of awe and humility before Him (Proverbs 15: 33). It is to recognize Him as our Creator and acknowledge our complete dependence upon Him in every activity of our lives." (See Kenneth D. Boa, "Visual Survey of the Bible" in The New Open Bible Study Edition 1990; page ).

In view of the foregoing suggestion that there is some link between biblical and African proverbial sayings and values, it is appropriate to look at biblical and Bassa teachings more closely. We shall point to some Bassa traditional teachings that the Bible affirms, as well as some of those that the Scripture corrects or replaces. We shall also draw attention to emphases that the Gospel can add to Bassa traditional teaching. Finally, we shall suggest traditional values that the Church should stress more than it is doing at present.

### **3.1 What the Scripture Affirms in Bassa Culture**

The Scripture affirms several key values and teachings which the Bassa stress. The following are examples.

#### **3.1.1 Peace, Fairness and Impartiality**

The Bassa know justice is imbedded in the nature of things. Thus they say Dhu kpa sohn dyedeeh sin-in. (A young child who sticks his hand in the flame is burnt.) No one can blame God or nature for that. Another proverb on the theme of justice and impartiality says that, Gedepoh ni zi kpodo. (God never sides with partiality.) A number of biblical statements affirm the above bassa teachings. We cite two: "God made people as a copy of Himself. So any person who kills a person must be killed by a person." (Genesis 9: 6). Also, "Don't be fooled; you cannot cheat God. A person harvests only the things he plants." (Galatians 6: 7).

#### **3.1.2 The Value of Truth**

Jaa se behn-indeh bun-wehnin (A decoration is inappropriate of truth; or truth does not need any decoration.) In other words, it is a lie which needs decoration in order to hide the wrong. This Bassa counsel to speak the truth without hesitation is upheld by Paul who wrote to the Ephesians, "You ere taught to become a new person. That new person is made to be like God - made to be truly good and holy. So you must stop telling lies. You all belong to each other in the same body." (Ephesians 4: 24).

#### **3.1.3 Peace and Reconciliation.**

The Bassa like peace, and so they discourage trouble-making. This is shown in the proverb: Da ni se dyi boa ke nyohn ni dya bo banwohn. (It is not conducive to create a fuss in a little place.) Paul gives a similar advice: "Live together in peace with each other. Don't be proud. Be willing to be friends with people who are not important to other

people. Don't be conceited." (Romans 12: 16). Jesus also affirms the importance of peace. He breathed peace on to the apostles when He said: "I leave you peace. It is my own peace I give you. I give you peace in a different way than the world does. So don't let your hearts be troubled. Don't be afraid." (John 14: 27).

Reconciliation is important for there to be peace. In order for reconciliation to take place, it is necessary for bitterness or ill-feeling to be removed. So the Bassa say: Bun-ehn ni se hwoun ke oh ni dyidi. (Unless the guts (bowel) within the rat are removed, the rat cannot be well-done.) Children remove the guts before they roast the rat for meal, or else it is not a good roast meat. Jesus affirms reconciliation and forgiveness: "If your brother or sister does something wrong to you, go and tell that person. If that person listens to you, then you have helped that person to be your brother again." (Matthew 18: 15).

#### **3.1.4 Acknowledging that other people have Knowledge and Wisdom**

No one person has a monopoly over knowledge or wisdom. This is acknowledged in the proverb, Hwodoun-ni-do ke oh ni fohn-nohn. (A single heart by itself is not wise.) This truth is upheld by the following biblical texts: (1) "Don't depend on your own wisdom. But respect the Lord and stay away from evil." (Proverbs 3:7). (2) "Don't do anything from selfish ambition or from a cheap desire to boast, but be humble towards one another, always considering others better than yourselves." (Philippians 2:3).

#### **3.1.5 Rights/Privileges and Obligations/Responsibilities**

In Bassa tradition parents and children mutually cherish the principle of give-and-take. The following proverbs indicate the understanding that exists regarding mutual rights and obligations between parents and children. The proverb, Deh dieh se boaa (Eating is not what growth is.), states that parents are obliged to do more than just feed their children; in addition to feeding their children, parents must train them. A number of biblical passages affirm this view, for example: Psalm 78: 5-8; Proverbs 5: 1-14; 22: 6 and 1 Timothy 5: 8).

On the other hand, children are to respect, obey and look after their parents. Two proverbs contain this advice. One is: Dyu ke oh ba ni vohn bodea. (The child and his father cannot contest cutlass.) The other is: Dyu ni dieh ke oh ni zi. (No child has eaten more than the father.) The proverbs advise children to obey rather than claim that they can throw cutlass or have eaten more than their parents, when their parents have been throwing cutlass and eating for many years before the children were born. The following Bible passages are in support of the Bassa teaching that children and servants should obey and, where necessary, look after their parents: Proverbs 5: 1-14; Ephesians 6: 1-3; Colossians 3: 22 and 1 Timothy 5: 4.

#### **3.1.6 Freedom of Expression and Right of Redress**

The proverb, Wudu-dyu ni pehn mohn (An outspoken child never slept hungry.), testifies to Bassa traditional advocacy for freedom of expression and the right to seek

redress. The Bible supports this. Moses appointed judges to settle disputes and complaints for redress of injustice among the Israelites. (See Exodus 18: 16-26 and Deuteronomy 1:9-18.) Again, when the Greek-speaking Christians complained about unfair treatment of their widows, the Jerusalem Church heard their complaint and appointed deacons to see to their needs (Acts 6: 1-6).

### 3.2 **What the Scripture Adds**

The Bassa have values, rules and procedures that govern their day to day lives and activities. It would seem that for normal social interactions, there is hardly any area in which there is need for a radically different or new values. It can be said that there is no need for the Scriptures to add any new values. However, in the religious and spiritual spheres, there is much that the Scriptures can add. For example, although the Bassa know of the Almighty God (Gedepohoh), they do not know Him as a triune God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Also, they do not have concepts like the Kingdom of God. As such, they do not have proverbs relating to these. With the acceptance of Christianity into Bassa culture, proverbs can be created, and old ones can be modified or given new application for teaching Christian truths to the Bassa.

### 3.3 **What the Gospel Corrects or Replaces**

More than a thousand years after God gave Israel the Ten Commandments to guide their daily living, Jesus upheld them. He declared: "Don't think that I have come to destroy the law of Moses or the teaching of the peoples. I came to give full meaning to their teachings." (Matthew 5: 17). In the process of giving the full meaning of their teachings, Jesus changed some of the old teachings. For example, He showed that adultery is not just lying with someone else's wife or husband, but also looking at a woman with lust (Matthew 5: 27-28), and that one should love not only one's neighbour but also one's enemies (matthew 5: 43-44).

In the same way as Jesus upheld the teachings of Moses, but corrected and replaced some of them, so also the Gospel, while affirming many of Bassa teachings, can correct or replace some of them. We cite three examples.

#### 3.3.1 **Inferiority of Females**

Bassa tradition restricts the role of women in society to caring for children and performing domestic services at home. By implication, this restriction suggests that women are inferior to men in Bassa tradition. This low value of women is substantiated by two proverbial names: (1) Maase-deh, which means, the female is devoid of human value; and (2) Gaamon-deh, which means, the male has human value. From this standpoint, Bassa society is man-centered, not woman-centered.

This view of women has to be corrected, for the Bible teaches that males and females have the same value: "So God made people in his own image. God made people a copy of Himself. God made them male and female." (Genesis 1: 27). The Bible further

teaches that men and women are the same, without any distinction (Galatians 3: 28); they are joint heirs of the grace of life (1 Peter 3: 7); and they are to be submissive to one another (Ephesians 5: 21).

### 3.3.2 Sexual Accusation against Women

There is a tendency to look down on women as being unfaithful. This is expressed in the saying, Je ni hweh maa xwin-niin. (No female is free from sexual unfaithfulness). The Bible cautions against such attitude of self-righteousness and condemnation of others: "Do not judge other people, and God will not judge you." (Matthew 7: 1). Again, the Bible shows that all human beings are sinners. (See, for example, John 8: 1-11, about those who accused the woman caught in adultery; and Romans 3: 23, that all have sinned.)

### 3.3.3 Selective Truth-telling

There is a Bassa proverb which says, Se wehnin gaa-zanyohn, keh oh se ban-nyohn wehnin. (Lying befits a war hero more than a rich man). If a war hero claims to have killed 100 men in a battle, no civilian can disprove it, since he cannot go to the battle front. But if a rich man says he has built a new home, any civilian can go there to verify. The proverb seems to suggest that lying is permissible if it cannot be discovered. The Gospel does not support any kind of selective truth-telling. Rather, it teaches that people should speak the truth at all times: "Don't lie to each other" (Colossians 3: 9); and "No more lying then! Everyone must tell the truth to his fellow-believer." (Ephesians 4: 25).

## 4 Values that Local Proverbs add to Biblical Emphases

The Bible commends a large variety of values that are desirable for human dignity and progress. These include values suitable for African societies. There is, however, the need to identify those that are of particular relevance to African societies, and to give them sufficient emphasis in the African Church to enhance life in Africa, especially life among African Christians.

Joshua Kudadjie (the Series Editor of these preaching and teaching series and author of the Ga and Dangme volume) points out in chapter 3 of his book two reasons why there is need for the special emphasis:

- (1) In some cases, the Bible does not lay as much emphasis on the values as in traditional African society.
- (2) Owing to the strong influence of non-African cultures, especially European culture, and other factors on African societies, these values - important as they are for keeping up the society - are getting lost; thus, causing break-down in African societies.

In view of the foregoing observations, Kudadjie draws attention to seven traditional values and suggests that churches add to them, and find effective ways of protecting them. These are:

1. Marriage: its seriousness and permanence;
2. The family: its closeness and strength;
3. Human community and fellowship rather than individualism;
4. Respect for the elderly, authority and procedure;
5. The reality of the world of the spirit: the need to point out the mistake and failure of the view that only material things are real or the only things that matter;
6. Dependence on the supernatural: hence, e.g., knowing how to appropriate the power of the Holy Spirit in one's life; and
7. The need for development of the whole person: body, mind and spirit.

We endorse this call by Kudadjie, and urge the Church, not only in Bassaland or even Liberia, but on the entire African continent so that the Church in Africa will be truly the light and salt in Africa - leading the way into the truth and preserving that which is best in African tradition.

## **CHAPTER 4**

## SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY AND REFLECTION

Let me, from what I have discovered regarding the values and qualities of Bassa proverbs and discussed in the preceding chapters, urge that more effort be made in the study of proverbs. This recommendation is not only for Bassa proverbs but for the proverbs of all other Liberian ethnic groups.

In the limited time I have spent to collect and study the 300 Bassa proverbs, I have learnt so much. But I have also felt deeply ashamed that I came to know so late what I should have known some 60 years ago. I now realize how much I have missed in life. I did not know the depth of the indigenous wisdom that God has given to Africa, embedded in the experience and memories of our ancestors, which they have transmitted orally in proverbial language to generation after generation for our guidance.

In the foregoing chapters, we pointed out the following salient points about African proverbs. I am constrained to urge that we take a second thought to buy back these values and qualities, and to repossess them.

1. Traditional proverbs are ancient and preserve the life experiences and wisdom of ages.
2. The wisdom of the elders is worthy to be cherished. Adhering to the values of the elders is the foundation of wisdom.
3. The emphasis of almost every proverb is on morality; the proverbs seek to teach rules about right and wrong behavior of people.
4. Strong warning against immoral behavior is given in proverbial language.
5. The high value of human dignity is well expressed in proverbs.
6. African proverbs are a body of philosophy of the people and relate to the events of daily life and the phenomena of religious wisdom.
7. To follow the principles of proverbial wisdom is to take the path to true success.
8. The treasure of wisdom, be it biblical or traditional, rests in the hands of God. No one can attain such wisdom apart from God. The following passages of Scripture bear the testimony: (1) "The Lord gives wisdom. Knowledge and understanding come from His mouth." (Proverbs 2:6). (2) "But the wisdom that comes from God is like this: First, it is pure. It is also peaceful, gentle, and easy to please. This wisdom is always ready to help people who have trouble and to do good things for other people. This wisdom is always fair and honest." (James 3: 17).

In the light of this, it behoves me to plead that the Church in Liberia should take good advantage of the African practice of using proverbs to explain, confirm or summarize a point, and to use them to teach biblical truths and moral lessons.

## **Possible Objections to using African Proverbs in the Church**

We are cognizant of the fact that in the many centuries past, some people have regarded African culture as a faith or religion. As a result in Liberia, for instance, deculturalization became a prerequisite for becoming a member of the Church. In consonance with this, the Church in Liberia forbade the use of African proverbs, being an element of the African culture. If a person converted to Christianity used indigenous African proverbs in the Church, it would be just like: "When a dog vomits (throws up), he comes back to his vomit. And after a pig is washed, the pig goes back and rolls in the mud again." (2 Peter 2: 22). For this reason, members of the Church have had difficulties using African proverbs to communicate the message of the Bible.

Others may be reluctant to use African proverbs because of fear of their "church masters". Some may also be uncomfortable with the traditional proverbs for the reason that some of their teachings conflict with the teachings of the Bible.

Still others, especially some "civilized Liberians," think that using traditional proverbs is committing the crime of tribalism. Tribalism in Liberia is the crime of treason which carried along with it capital punishment. Using tribal proverbs in public in Liberia would mean inciting the masses against the "civilized government," owned and solely controlled by the elite Americo-Liberians since 1847.

## **Responses to the Objections**

One would agree that these possible objections are quite strong, and could undermine the use of indigenous proverbs in the Church. However, one believes that there are responses to them that are equally strong. The responses which we offer below deserve careful and sympathetic attention.

Regarding the view that African culture is a religion, for example, while one may not totally reject it, one can say that the definition is not wholly correct. The truth is that culture has several branches. The word "culture" may be used to refer to a particular society or civilization, especially when considered in relation to its ideas, its art or its way of life.

Religion is another aspect of culture. Thus, African traditional religion is part of African culture, and has to do with belief in and the power of ancestors, gods, etc. Adherents of such a traditional culture need to be converted from it to the Christian religion for their salvation in Christ.

But another ramification of culture is about the wisdom of the people, buried in their proverbs, in their legends or folklore, in their music, and in their oral history. It has to do also with their system of marriage, their way of dressing, speaking, educating their children, and so forth. In this branch of culture, we do not need a religious conversion. That aspect of the culture is not the faith of the people, but a binding cord of their common existence.

As regards the "fear of church masters," that need not arise, if we are truly saved by grace through faith in Christ. The Bible teaches us to fear no human being or authority but God Almighty alone (Luke 12: 4-5). Neither are we to please any human master but God alone. That Almighty God wants to speak to us by our own natural wisdom.

Were proverbs to be used to arouse negative ethnic feelings against another ethnic group, or to undermine a Government, that would be wrong. For the Bible teaches that the time of tribalism is over and that all are one in Christ (Galatians 3: 28). It teaches also that all people are to obey the state authorities (Romans 13: 1). But there can be nothing wrong in using proverbs or any other aspect of one's culture to worship God or communicate the gospel, if these do not conflict with the gospel.

The reality of cultural immersion Apart from the above responses, it is also important to note that no part of a human being's life falls outside culture. If anyone tries to live without a culture, then it would mean a refusal to live in this world. For example, one cannot live as an African without placing emphasis on the family, community, fellow-feeling, respect for elders, awareness of the supernatural or belief in God Almighty. All these aspects of African culture are in line with biblical teachings.

Among the many aspects of African life and culture is the use of proverbs. It is obvious that there can be real trouble if proverbs are not used properly. Now that we are going to use African proverbs to communicate God's message from the Bible, the best way in which we can use African proverbs in our church ministry should be to use them to explain, illustrate or reinforce the biblical truths. In doing that, we must always be sure that the Bible is the basis of our message; for the Bible must eternally remain the highest authority insofar as the Christian is concerned. Proverbs as well as other aspects of culture must be subject to biblical teaching.

### **Advantages in using African Proverbs**

As Kudadjie points out in his Ga and Dangme Proverbs for Preaching and Teaching:

The use of African proverbs in African congregations has great advantages. The citing of relevant proverbs makes the audience interested, stay awake, and pay keen attention to the message. They also get involved by using their imagination. Thus, they enjoy the message, remember it, and see themselves agreeing with the truth being proclaimed.

He further notes that Jesus Himself, in support of the aforesaid advantages, used proverbial sayings frequently, and that He succeeded in getting His hearers to understand and respond to His message - even though they all did not always accept it.

These should be convincing enough for the Church in Africa to encourage the use

of proverbs in its preaching and teaching ministry.

### **Suggestions for further study and follow-up**

This book on Bassa Proverbs is not the only book on African proverbs meant for preaching and teaching, but one in a group which have been published primarily for teachers and preachers. These books are purposely published to encourage scholars and educational institutions to find ways of keeping up this effort. The following suggestions are made to encourage further study of African proverbs as a follow-up to this book.

### **Institutions of Higher Learning**

Our sincere desire is to involve institutes of African Studies, African Religious Studies departments as well as Theological Colleges and Seminaries in the study and promotion of African proverbial sayings and to encourage them to design courses for teaching African proverbs. This can be done as part of courses in biblical exegesis, hermeneutics, exposition, gospel contextualization, techniques of preaching, and the use of Jesus' parables. Lecturers and students are encouraged to use the existing collections of proverbs, or to undertake projects to collect proverbs of their own people. We desire that material collected and knowledge acquired through such courses be used in the church for preaching and in schools for teaching.

If institutions of higher learning are impressed by the vision and accept the challenge to teach proverbs that preserve African wisdom of the ages, then no doubt, the following achievements can be expected.

1. An improvement in the quality and relevance of the education they offer their students;
2. preservation of the experience and wisdom of our ancestors and of the proverbs that are in danger of getting lost;
3. a legacy of written proverbs for the benefit of the present and future generations;
4. a revival of interest in the study and use of proverbs among the youth; and
5. inculcation of the moral and social values of Africans.

### **The General Reader**

The teaching and studying of African proverbs is not a task for preachers and teachers alone. It is equally for all who love wisdom, particularly Africans who are interested in the wisdom of their ancestors and who can do some further studies in the use of African proverbs. To all such, the following exercises are recommended.

1. Write notes on some of the additional 100 proverbs listed towards the end of this

book for your own use.

2. Collect proverbs in your own mother tongue and record them.
3. Write notes on proverbs you have collected and/or those already in print. The notes may follow the pattern used in this book, or some other style.
4. Group proverbs into topics for teaching moral and social values to students.
5. Critically reflect on given proverbs and draw out their special strengths that must be stressed in contemporary society, as well as weaknesses which need to be modified or deleted.
6. Critically evaluate the proverbs you are working on and find out:
  - (a) What the Gospel affirms about their values, or what it adds, corrects and replaces; and
  - (b) What values and themes in the proverbs should be given more emphasis in the African Church than is given in the Bible.
7. Preachers should:
  - (a) Find additional Bible texts or stories which can be used with the proverbs explained in this book;
  - (b) Select hymns or other songs that can be used with proverbs explained in this book.
8. Find and cite at least one appropriate indigenous African proverb in every sermon or major address that you may deliver.

### **Concluding Appeal to Fellow Liberians**

It is a joy to offer this volume of collection of over 300 Bassa proverbs to the people of Liberia, especially the young people of Grand Bassa County, makers of the future of the Bass. These proverbs are just a crumb of the wealth of knowledge and wisdom of the Bassa people. We challenge all Liberians, a people of tremendous brilliance, not only to collect, study and use proverbs. We further challenge you to search for the many missing links in the history of Liberia, and to discover the full heritage of our people.

I trust that this little contribution will be welcomed by you my own people, so that you will make good use of it in your daily activities, especially to communicate the Word of God to your own people.

## **PART II**

### **CHAPTER 5**

#### **ANNOTATED BASSA PROVERBS FOR PREACHING AND TEACHING**

##### **Introduction to the Format of Annotated Proverbs**

In this Part of the book, two hundred Bassa Proverbs are presented. Each of them has notes written on it in five sections.

1. First, the common version of the proverb in Bassa is given. (In the English edition, a literal translation of the proverb is given in English.)
2. Under Explanation/Origin, a literal explanation of the proverb is given. In a few cases, this section

also gives the story of the origin of the proverb. In most cases, the origin is not known; in such cases, only the literal or primary meaning is given. Thus, the explanation is limited

to the image used, the actual life situation depicted, custom or history referred to, etc.

3. Under Meaning, the deeper or real meaning and moral lesson of the proverb is given.

4. Then, under Purpose/Occasion for Citing the Proverb, the actual or probable occasions on which the proverb is used in the traditional society are stated. Also, the specific or possible purposes for which the proverb is cited are stated. Possible occasions or purposes for which the proverb can be used in Christian preaching and teaching are also suggested.

5. Finally, under the heading Related Key Biblical Themes/Stories, a number of Bible passages, themes, stories, etc. are cited. These are examples of texts, etc. which one can use the proverb to explain or emphasize.

Preachers and teachers are encouraged to use these proverbs either in the forms stated here, or in modified forms. The Bible texts, etc. can also be added to, but care should be taken to see that the proverbs used suit them.

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