

African Proverb of the Month
August, 2007

Zakoma-zakoma, pusi adagwa (anagwa) chagada (cagada). (Nyanja, Chewa)

Asiyesikia la mkuu huvunjika guu. (Figurative Swahili)

Greed led the monkey to fall on its back. (Literal English)

A child or youth who does not listen to an elder's advice gets his or her leg broken. (Figurative English)

Nyanja ([Mozambique](#) , [Zimbabwe](#) , [Zambia](#)) Proverb

Chewa ([Malawi](#)) Proverb

Also Bemba ([Zambia](#))

Background, Explanation, Meaning and Everyday Use

The wise sages in Zambia use this proverb to warn young people who demonstrate excess enthusiasm for seemingly innocent pleasures, but which could lead to some danger if indulged in too much. The proverb encourages the youth to refrain from excesses or from being

headstrong in life, such as flirtatious behaviour, excess love for food, or any other innocent looking but dangerous pursuits taken to extremes. This proverb is just one of the many clusters of proverbs in the 73 ethnic groups in Zambia. The Bemba version is: *Akafupa utemenwe ekakusha imichene* . Most certainly similar proverbs exist in other parts of the world.

In the case of the Nyanja/Chewa proverb cited above, the monkey (*pusi* or *mnhwele* or *nyani*) is very well known for its amazing agility as it swings through the trees in search of food or simply enjoying itself! The monkey is regarded as one of the most agile animals on earth to the extent that even when it misses its grip and falls upside down, it will still right itself/save itself by somersaulting and falling on all fours.

The monkey may sometimes be so taken up by these antics that it forgets the law of gravity and fall on its back to the ground. Normally the monkey will right itself as it hurtles down to the ground so that it will land on all fours. However, in circumstances where it concentrates too much on food or excessively leaps from branch to branch, it may miss its mark and uncharacteristically fall to the ground on its back and injure itself or even die! I

n this particular case of the proverb the monkey was so taken up with greed (eating food up a tree) that even with warning signs -- the approach of danger/an enemy -- he or she continued to eat and only at last moment tried to save itself to no avail. It fell and landed upside down!

Biblical Parallels

In the *New Testament* our Lord Jesus Christ gives many examples of how excessive following of the law can lead to missing heaven. *Matthew 23: 4-34* Jesus takes a swipe at the scribes and Pharisees and describes them in quite strong terms: hypocrites, blind guides, whited sepulchers, fools, witnesses and sons of murderers, lawless, serpents, brood of vipers! These are strong terms, but the scribes and Pharisees deserved to be called so because, despite being religious leaders, their life style portended evil. They oppressed the people instead of lighting their burdens and leading them to God. Even when the scribes and Pharisees fasted, as they were required to do, they did it in such a manner as to let the "whole world" know about it. Indeed in

Luke

6: 7-11 scribes and Pharisees watch Jesus to see whether he would heal (work) on the Sabbath. In

John

7: 22-23 Jesus answers them that his duty is to heal the sick on any day just like they too circumcise a person on the Sabbath. See also

Luke

13:15-17,

Matthew

15:1-14 and

Matthew

12:1-8 where Jesus clearly shows the scribes and Pharisees that their blind and excess following of the law does not conform to the will of God.

The proverbs of Solomon declare that children (this includes youth) must hear and do that which is advised of them. *Proverbs 2--7* are all addressed to "my son". They all have the same message: To get wisdom is the main thing. Indeed, even the rest of this book written by the wisest man who has ever lived rests on the importance of young people to choose life and escape the wiles of the devil and the devil's agents (1 *Kings 7-14*).

Contemporary Use and Religious Application

Applied to the modern world, one does not have far to look. There have many deaths of young people (and many more are on the way), all because of disregarding wise counsel from the older generations. The trappings of modernity have played havoc among populations. For example, most graves today are the resting places of the younger generation who have succumbed to the deadly HIV/AIDS. In most instances these young people were too focused in responding the attractions of the modern world or were merely caught up in new fads.

Traditions and caution have been thrown to the wind. The young no longer seem to listen to the wise counsel of old folks. After all they can now get all their answers from the internet or the cellular phone (a blessing or a curse?). The *Bible* has been downgraded to just another book. Increasingly many activities and programs organized by churches for the benefit of the youth are simply occasions for experiments in premature adulthood and other anti-social activities. So they die before their grey-haired fathers and mothers go to their graves. Recently there was a front page story in a leading Zambian newspaper about a young uncle who had the expressed intention of marrying his own mother's daughter ('niece!'). The situation was only saved by the strong condemnation by the general public and the fact that the girl was spirited out of the country by concerned family members.

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