

INDIGENOUS PROVERBS: OPENING DOORS TO THE HEART



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As the heavy metal gate to his home slowly creaks open, “Ali” approaches and peeks through a small crack between the gate and the compound wall to see who’s entering. Suddenly he bursts through the gate like a broken dam spilling out pent-up water.¹

“You have come back! I knew you would not forget me,” Ali exclaims with a loud voice, his eyes as wide as the newly opened gate. Rushing over to give me a big hug, the tall, lean African man then puts his arm around my waist and accompanies me to the house.

“Forget you? How could I do that? I have sent messages to you, but it’s always better to come see you in person. The elders say, ‘*Tuntoming a yok ka nansa; ka kan yok suiya*’ (‘To send a message by someone cools the legs; it does not cool the heart’).”

Ali’s smile broadens as the proverb quickly sinks into his soul. This is the “sweet talk” that Ali enjoys since it’s entertaining, memorable and promotes quick understanding. Amid the laughter, his grip around my waist tightens as he launches into the traditional greetings—asking about families, health, and more.

“We have a proverb in Hausa that says, ‘What the heart loves, there the legs will go,’” Ali offers. I smile and then ponder the meaning.

Seeing the puzzled look on my face, Ali helps. “Think about it. What the heart wants to do and where it wants to go, it tells the feet to move, and the feet obey.” Ali knows that much of the joy of proverbs lies in discovering the meaning. So he shouldn’t explain it too quickly and spoil the challenge for me.

“Yes, I see. The heart leads the way, and the body then follows,” I respond, as the fog slowly clears away.

“Have you ever seen the heart go somewhere it did not want to go, but it had to listen to the feet?”

Wagging my head back and forth satisfies Ali. We are connecting at his cultural level, opening doors of understanding.

Ali concludes with his widest smile yet. “You see. What the heart loves, there the legs will go!”

Enjoying this bantering and negotiating meaning between two people from two different worlds, I respond, “Now I understand. The feelings of the heart are so strong that they pull the feet to where they may not otherwise want to go.”

Ali now has a look of total satisfaction, like a school teacher who delights in the facial expression of a student who finally learns an important point.

“It is interesting how the heart pulls so strongly that it forces people to go to far away places,” I continue. “I think God’s heart is like that, as well.”

Ali’s curiosity is now aroused. We have had plenty of spiritual conversations before, but our cultural backgrounds are so far apart that the doors of understanding are often closed or, at

best, slightly cracked open. Now, though, Ali's own proverb has opened a door for spiritual understanding.

"God loves people because he is the one who created them. He made them expressly to be with him. His heart pulled so strong that his feet had to come to earth and be with them."

"You mean he wanted to move among them?"


His choice of words surprise and delight me, as Jesus is perhaps best described as Immanuel, meaning "God among us."

"Yes," I affirm, "that is why Jesus came to earth. God's heart pulled so strongly that his feet had to come among us. Jesus was the feet of God!"

Ali listens intently. Now the door of his heart is opening widely, and meaning flows through like a river. While Ali's proverb is enjoyable and memorable, it also communicates spiritual meaning in a way that feels right in his own culture. I and other missionaries had spoken to him before about Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, and about putting faith in him. As a Muslim, Ali agrees that Jesus was a good person, but he does not understand the role Jesus plays in God's plan of salvation. Why would God want to come to earth anyway? Ali believes God created everything but now is far removed from daily events. He understands God as the ultimate judge but until now has not considered how God's heart may be moved by the people he created. And for Ali, it makes sense.

While all of Ali's questions are not answered this day, he's beginning to understand the ways and purposes of God through proverbs and concepts he appreciates. This explanation of Jesus' coming to earth is congruent with some of his own deeply held core values and affirms his own worldview. It describes Jesus in uniquely African and also fully Christian terms and metaphors. In the past, Christianity was presented to Ali in foreign terms and practices. Proverbs are now opening the door for Jesus to be at home in Ali's own culture.²

"There is a God whose heart pulls so strong that his feet must come to be with us," Ali says. "Hmm, that is good news. I would like to know more about this."

The crack in the gate is widening for further learning—for him and for me. One day, will it burst open? 

¹ Originally published in a slightly different form in Moon W. Jay 2009 *African Proverbs Reveal Christianity in Culture: A Narrative Portrayal of Builsa Proverbs Contextualizing Christianity in Ghana*, American Society of Missiology Monograph Series 5. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications. This chapter was also featured in Krabill, James R. et al, eds. 2013 *Worship and Mission for the Global Church: An Ethnodoxology Handbook*. Pasadena: William Carey Library, 229–231. In both cases, this work has been used by permission of W. Jay Moon. For more information on gathering and using proverbs, see also two articles by Pete Unseth on the *Ethnodoxology Handbook* DVD.

² To learn how indigenous proverbs can open ears to hear the gospel, rooting it in African soil, and clearing foggy communication, see Moon, W. Jay 2004 "Sweet Talk in Africa: Using Proverbs in Ministry." *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 40:2, 162–69.

CHANTING THE SCRIPTURES

/ MAE ALICE REGGY

When a New Testament translation project for the Wolayta of Ethiopia began in the early 1970s, the government would not allow books to be printed in indigenous languages; only in Amharic, the official language. The solution, at least short-term, was to record the translation as it was being done, making it accessible immediately and especially to those who could not read—about 80 percent of the some 2 million Wolayta speakers.

The Wolayta may not have been book-oriented then, but they did have a rich oral tradition, which included their cultural chanting and singing styles. So chants and songs were added to the tapes to break up the reading. These also served as devices for memorizing

the Scriptures. The word of God would become fixed in people's hearts and minds when reinforced by tunes and chants the Wolayta loved, and would spring to their lips throughout the day.

By the time the Wolayta New Testament was printed in 1981, many Christians already knew some parts of the text by heart.

To record each passage, a few verses were read, lasting about a minute. Different voices spoke for the various participants in Gospel narratives. Before the listeners could lose interest, the next few verses would be chanted in traditional Wolayta style, in an antiphonal response along with the cassette. The chanter would sing only the words of the text, but the antiphonal response would provide an application of the passage to listeners' own lives or a reinforcement of the subject being taught. The antiphonal refrains emphasized major truths and

stirred in the listeners a rhythm that prevented drowsiness, as they listened in the dark of night after a hard day's work in the fields.

After a minute or two of chanting had finished, another short reading followed. And then again the pace changed—the reading would be followed by a song composed from a key verse in the passage. The tune fixed the words in the listeners' minds, as the singer on the tape repeated the memory verse four times in a contemporary Wolayta song form. The listeners would again be encouraged to sing along with the cassette, to memorize the Scripture verse. And in this way they continued listening, chanting, and singing God's word.

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