

Lugbara Proverbs and Ethics

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Abstract. – This article outlines the relation between Lugbara proverbs (the author has collected 936 of them) and ethics. The first part of the article considers the origin, the medium, and the message of Lugbara proverbs; the second part recalls the nature of ethics with some common approaches to it and compares them to Lugbara proverbs. The conclusion shows, among the rest, how Lugbara proverbs echo all sides of life, and thus they touch upon every aspect of ethics. At the same time, these proverbs are just a part of Lugbara literature and culture; therefore, a full vision of Lugbara ethics can only result from considering the entire scope of Lugbara life. [Uganda, Lugbara, ethics, proverbs, oral literature]

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Some 25 years ago, I began the collection of Lugbara proverbs, an undertaking partially connected with a research into the ethics of the Lugbara people I was carrying out. The question that most often posed itself during this exercise bore on the nature of the relation between Lugbara proverbs and ethics. As the collection comprising 936 proverbs is now about to be concluded I attempt here to outline an answer to that question articulating it in two parts: a description of the nature of Lugbara proverbs, and a consideration of ethics in the context of the same proverbs.

1. The Nature of Lugbara Proverbs

I infer the nature of Lugbara proverbs from the general description of proverbs found in language dictionaries, and from the specific experience gathered during my research. I undertook

the collection with a working description of a proverb synthesized from linguistic dictionaries that consider a proverb to be a short, pithy, fixed, popular, experiential, prescriptive, and usually allegorical sentence. As my research developed, I supplemented this general definition with my own findings; now I think that the definition of dictionaries and the result of my investigation can be combined in a paradigm envisaging the origin, the medium, and the message of Lugbara proverbs; these three aspects are the subtitles of this first part of the article dealing with the nature of Lugbara proverbs.

a) The Origin

A Lugbara proverb is experiential in the sense that it originates from experience. This experiential origin is echoed in the topics that interest the proverbs and that span the entire life of a person.

The immediate experiential context of Lugbara proverbs is Lugbara society, particularly in its traditional dimension. Traditionally the Lugbara are a segmentary society, namely an acephalous society with a permanent re-arrangement of various more or less independent groups. Political authority is not generally held on an individual basis as in centralized societies; public relations are thus maintained by groups rather than single persons. The consequent alliances among these groups and their competitive attitudes are liable to change quite often. It is thus extremely difficult to map the group-structure of this society in fixed patterns; situations are so complex and varying that it is only by living within them that one finds one's bearing among the various groups. The total structure of this society is of the type called "segmentary" by Fortes and Evans-Pritchard, and when the segments of the structure are lineages we speak of a "segmentary lineage system" (Middleton and Tait [eds.] 1958: 7). The Lugbara have this latter system, namely a segmentary lineage