

# **A Linguistic and Ethnographic Analysis of Nsenga Proverbs**

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Place of fieldwork: Zambia

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## **Research Background**

The study of African proverbs faces two significant challenges. First, proverbs are steadily losing their pivotal role and place in the life of the modern African person and thereby the modern scholar; and second, most studies have simply concentrated on documentation or paremiography, the discourse functions and conversational meanings of proverbs. In relation to the latter challenge, there is a feared oversimplification of the supposed meanings that proverbs have and communicate. In addition to several efforts pertaining to specifying the meanings of proverbs, there appears to be little research into exploring the ways in which meaning is composed in proverbs.

## **Research Purpose and Aim**

This study sought to go beyond the current trend on studies of proverbs in order to address two issues. First, to make a collection and carry out a linguistic study of proverbs by analyzing and describing their grammar. The linguistic study was aimed to enable one to go beyond simply explaining the meanings and functions of proverbs and into dealing with how all aspects of grammar, which include phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics, affect the phraseology, meaning, nature, and interpretation of proverbs. Second, the study was designed to focus on the compositionality of the meaning of proverbs.

## **Results and Achievement of Fieldwork**

The study was carried out in four Nyanja-speaking polities of Zambia; namely, Lusaka in Lusaka Province, Nyimba, Petauke, Mambwe, and Chipata in Eastern Province. Approximately 900 units of data were collected. Each unit of data included either a proverb by itself or a proverb and related ethnographic information. Ethnographic information included explanations regarding the use of the proverbs, summarized stories told together with the proverb, and background information related to the collected proverbs. The data is meant to feed into my doctoral thesis.

## **Implications and Impacts for Future Research**

As anticipated, it was very difficult to obtain information from the younger generation. Many young

people displayed ignorance of the existence of proverbs in Nsenga. In fact, even some relatively old people were unable to be of much help. One respondent actually stated that there were no proverbs in Nsenga. Only individuals who were older than 50 years of age were able to remember and interpret some of the proverbs. In the future, it needs to be clarified why the young people in particular expressed ignorance of proverbs in Nsenga. There was also evidence that new proverbs are evolving, which warrants further research.



A Nsenga-speaking village





Children in a Nsenga-speaking village



Herding cattle in a Nsenga-speaking village