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# INCORPORATING TRADITIONAL PROVERBIAL WISDOM INTO MODERN SCHOOL GUIDANCE AND COUNSELING

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Some traditional wisdom, especially one expressed in proverbs, can be said to be valid and reliable, thus laying a sound basis for scientific explanations. This is, perhaps, because these proverbs are formulated on the basis of careful observation of human experiences. For example, the adage birds of a feather flock together, seem to confirm the reality from observed patterns of experiences by associating those who have strong social bonds. Such wisdom seems to have guided traditional communities before the onset of formal education. This wisdom has not been overshadowed by the introduction of formal education. Research in Kiswahili reveals that proverbs play a central role in discourse. Proverbs inspire, warn and guide. Incidentally, this is what guidance is all about. A counselor inspires, warns and guides during a guidance session, with a view to pre-empt a problem that could have resulted from ignorance. This paper recommends the incorporation of traditional wisdom, such as proverbs, into modern guidance and counseling. Modern theories of counseling seem to ignore this element of traditional wisdom.*

**Key words:** Guidance, Counseling, Proverbs, wisdom.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The terms guidance, counseling and psychotherapy are sometimes used interchangeably (Sheltzer and Stone, 1980; King'ori, 2004) to mean an interpersonal relationship in which a professionally trained individual attempts to help another in understanding himself or herself and in case of a challenge help at coping with the problems in areas such as education, vocation and family relationships (Eysenck, 1979). However, when the terms are used independently, they refer to various levels of addressing a problem. Guidance is usually taken to mean the initial level at which professional advice and necessary information is provided, usually to a group, to avert a problem that may occur in future due to ignorance. Counseling is the second level of intervention, where a problem has already been encountered. This level seeks to help the client in identifying a solution or solutions. The last level, psychotherapy, refers to the treatment, through psychological means, of an emotional disorder (Sheltzer and Stone, 1980).

Effective facilitation of this treatment usually requires in-patient treatment. These different levels are usually performed by a counselor, though a clinical psychologist is the best equipped to handle psychotherapy. The fact that it may be the same person, the counselor, who addresses the three levels may explain why the three concepts are used interchangeably (Huggins, 2014). Proverbs in this case would enhance the role of guidance in that they usually warn, with the aim of the preventing the occurrence of a problem.

#### **PURPOSE OF THE PAPER**

This paper discusses the possibility of incorporating proverbs in the practice of guidance. Instead of such wisdom being studied merely as part of language, it could be formulated as hypotheses, tested through research and incorporated into modern science of guidance. A unit could be introduced in psychology university curricula, whether as core or elective, to preserve and utilize this wisdom. The unit could be called “indigenous guidance”.

#### **METHOD**

The author utilized both primary and secondary sources to derive the proverbs. Primacy sources included use of focus group discussion with first year psychology students.

Students were requested to give examples of proverbs that have been helpful in guiding their lives. For secondary sources, text books on proverbs were studied.

#### **DISCUSSION**

Formal guidance and counseling were first conceptualized in the US in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, in response to problems being faced in American communities including child labor, rising crime, economic hardships and problems associated with immigration (Sheltzer and Stone, 1980). The list is longer today because the society has become more complex with urbanization and change in technology. In the US they are struggling with gun violence, with 2018 having been the worst year for gun violence in schools (Lopez, 2018). In Kenya, our major challenge is arson attack by students in a school, which often leads to loss of life of their fellow students (Nyamai, 2018).

The counseling psychology curriculum as offered by most universities in the world adopts theories of counseling developed in Europe and America in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (Counseling Directory, 2014). Ironically, modern guidance and counseling theories ignore the very traditional wisdom that offered guidance in its place. It is only some German and French Universities, among a few others, that are going back to investigate traditional guidance, but only in the form of graphology.

Graphology, the study of possible relationship between handwriting and personal characteristics, has been a point of focus, relatively more, in Europe than the US (Corsini, 1984).

According to Kudadjie (see Mphande 2001), African proverbs contain observations and good counsel against vices like anger, backbiting, greed, ingratitude, laziness, lying, pride, procrastination, selfishness and stealing. In modern society where these challenges are advancing day by day, any form of guidance that would help to address the vices would be a treasure. Yet, according to Nussbaum (see Mphande 2001), proverbs are an endangered heritage of African peoples, under increasing threat from Western influences including Western education. Scholars of Religious studies noticed the gap that psychology may be oblivious of, yet this area of concern is more psychology than religion. In October, 1995, an initiative was started to preserve African proverbs. A symposium was organized, on the theme “African Proverbs in the Twenty-First Century”, and held at the University of South Africa (UNISA), in Pretoria (Mphande 2001; Mbiti 1997). In concurrence to the religious symposium, I wish to claim that proverbs are a form of traditional wisdom that is rich in guidance, and that could be incorporated into modern guidance and counseling.

Among the African communities, for example, before the introduction of formal guidance and counseling, traditional guidance was imparted through various modes, namely; songs and dances, storytelling, proverbs, general talks, sagacious talks, planned visits to uncles, aunties and grandparents. Some, if not all, of these activities can be retained and incorporated in modern guidance and counseling.

Proverbs appear to be the easiest form of traditional wisdom to incorporate in school guidance for various reasons. Firstly, it is no longer possible to for parents to offer guidance during normal daily chores. This is because of schooling and the changing nature of the economy. Children go to school and parents work away from the home in the case of formal employment. In the traditional agricultural communities, children would accompany their parents to the farm thereby securing them ample time to chat about life issues. In the evening, parents would offer additional guidance through story telling. Modern children are busy with homework while their tired parents long to sleep in order to relax and be ready to start the next workday. Secondly, many African communities’ initiation ceremonies are dying or are dead. The advice that that would have been passed on during female circumcision may not happen now, because it is illegal to have female circumcision, at least in Kenya.

Thirdly, the extended family system is also collapsing such that children no longer stay with grandparents, uncles and aunties to listen to their educative stories. However, proverbs are a timeless wisdom that is not bound to changing situations unlike most of the other modes of guidance.

Proverbs can be defined as popular short sayings with words of advice, guidance or warning. Interestingly, many proverbs from different communities resemble, as we shall illustrate below, a characteristic that may suggest the reliability of such wisdom. According to Kudadjie (see Mphande 2001), in Africa, proverbs are not usually ascribed to any particular individuals, but collectively to the community, the wise men and women of yore. In most cases, it is not known who composed a particular proverb. The case is further illustrated using proverbs derived from various sources including, Hindu website (2014), Wanjohi (2001), Zona (1996), Copage (1993), Njururi(1969), Benson (1964) and Barra (1960). Let us now examine the guidance contained in a few proverbs from different communities:

#### *i) Chinese*

*A long journey starts with the first step.* The proverb is inspirational. It encourages one not to be demotivated by the pending amount of work but to set on the task.

The moral here is that one gets surprised at how fast the task can be accomplished when the going begins. For example, some people fear to get involved in a study program in the fear that it will take long. But after enrolling and completing, they notice that time was an illusion to their dreams.

#### *ii) German*

*Everyone cooks with water (jeder Kocht nurmit wasser).* The proverb is used to emphasize that human beings are equal and thus one should not be intimidated by the position one holds in the society. Irrespective of one's position in leadership, they must need water at some point. In essence, therefore, all human beings are equal in a way. A famous Professor in counseling Psychology, Carl Rogers (1902-1987) often emphasized that a counselor must never discriminate clients on the basis of class. This emphasis is a hallmark in one of the most popular counseling models referred to as the "Person-Centered Therapy" (Corey 2001)

*Speaking is silver but silence is gold (Reden ist silber schweigen ist gold).* The proverb teaches that it is wise to speak less and listen more. We have equivalent in the Bible (James 1: 19) "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak..." An English equivalence would be, "a fool is not a fool until he begins to speak".

*It's the last person in a run who gets bitten by a dog (Den letzten bei(ss)en die Hunde).*

The proverb teaches that we should try as much as possible not to be the last to do something because we may be locked out, or be rushed to do it and therefore not give it our best.

### iii) *Japanese*

*The tongue is like a sharp knife, it kills without drawing blood* (This can be equated with the Christian biblical guidance that warns that the tongue is a small part of the body but like a spark can set the whole forest on fire (James 3:1-12)). We should watch our words. Words can make or break. People fight after exchanging harsh words. Similarly, people have committed suicide following harsh discouraging words from a significant other. This is an important principle to guide a counselor because his skill involves choice of words.

### iv) *Haitian*

*The empty bag cannot stand.* The proverb emphasizes the significance of nutrition. For a body to function well nutrition is necessary. This proverb can be applied to counsel employers who underpay workers, such that they cannot afford adequate meals and yet they expect them to perform well. This has an equivalence in English, "A hungry man is an ugly man".

This proverb can guide principles in organizational psychology.

### v) *Hindu*

Hindus have what they call popular aphorisms or golden rules. We present five (5) of these below:

*One should keep oneself five yard distance from a carriage, ten yards from a horse, and one hundred yards from an elephant; but the distance one should keep from a wicked man cannot be measured.*

*Just as the moon is the light of the night and the sun the light of the day, so are good children the light of their family.*

*The virtuous man may be compared to a large leafy tree which, while it is itself exposed to the heat of the sun, gives coolness and comfort to others by covering them with its shade.*

*The favors of a prostitute appear like nectar at first, but they soon become poison.*

*The pursuit of knowledge is troublesome at first, but knowledge is a source of great delight when it is acquired.*

In addition, the Hindus have four stages of life: 0-25; 26-50; 51-75 and 76-100; although because of the declining lifespan the stages have been reduced by five years each. Of great significance in traditional guidance is the first stage in life which is usually referred to as the student's age.

During this stage, the child or an adolescent is encouraged to learn as much as possible without necessarily caring to contribute to societal debates because a time will come, after this stage, when they will be expected to contribute from what they have been learning all along (Hindu website 2014; Chakkarath, 2005).

#### vi) *Kikuyu*

These are Bantus who live in Kenya mainly in the Central Counties of Kenya. The following are a few proverbs from the community.

*The eye despises a hero (Riitho rimenaga njamba)* – This is similar to the English, "He who does not know you does not value you." People resemble. It is not easy to decipher a person's credentials by appearance unless you are introduced to them. This proverb counsels that we should treat everyone with dignity because among the people we serve could be dignitaries that could influence our success or failure in future.

*One who minds his own business avoids trouble (mwitwari ndari haaro).* The proverb warns people against poking their noses in affairs that do not concern them. This is, especially, important for rumor mongers. They can easily find themselves in trouble or even endanger their lives following a backlash after they are identified as the source of the malicious rumor.

*A word once spoken cannot be retrieved (mugambo nduugukagwo).* The proverb is similar to English proverb *think twice before you speak*. Regretting after uttering careless words does not help. You can never erase the words in the minds of those who heard them. *A visitor defecates on a grave (mugeni amiiaga mbiriraini).* This is an interesting proverb with a very significant message. The proverb underscores the dangers of ignorance and the importance of asking when you are not sure. It also advises on the need to learn the culture of a people that you are interacting with for the first time. According to Wanjohi (1997), the traditional Kikuyu did not have communal cemeteries. The dead were buried near the homestead. The burial places were not marked and toilet facilities were non-existent. It was therefore possible for a visitor to defecate on a grave, which would be sacrilege. This proverb can inform cross-cultural psychology.

*No day dawns like another (gutiri muthenya ukiaga ta ungi).* The proverb gives the listener hope to ride on. If today was a bad day for you, tomorrow may be a good one. The proverb carries a message similar to the common English saying, "never give up". You could give up just when you are about to succeed.

*A piece of land is never small. (Gichigo kia mugunda gitinyihaga).* A small piece of land can be very productive in the hands of a hard working person while a large piece of land can be useless in the hands of a lazy person.

The proverb teaches us to use whatever is within our means to invest. There are those who wait until they have a lot of money yet opportunities are available to start in a small way and move to the desired destination. This is similar to the English adage “do not despise humble beginnings”.

*To be a servant at one point does not prevent one from being served in future (Gutungata gutigiragia mundu agatungatwo).* The proverb underscores the significance of humble beginnings. To be a servant does not mean that this is a permanent position in life. Servants ultimately rise to prominence. Thus, we should never be ashamed to serve as subordinates because this is not a permanent position but a means to an end. As said earlier, we should not despise humble beginnings.

*An object that is being thrown may not land on the intended target. (Haria iikagio tiho iguaga).* This is often used to console one who is being mishandled by a senior on the basis of his or her inferior status in an organization or even in a society. At a point in future, he or she may prosper to the dismay of the oppressor. An oppressor may plan evil for a subordinate but fortunes may turn to the dismay of the evil planner. The evil planner, in future, may in fact find himself or herself at the mercies of the person he or she intended to humiliate.

*The circumciser was himself uncircumcised at one point. (Muruithia arume ari kihii).* No one was born circumcised. They had to be

circumcised by someone before they themselves could assume the circumcisers’ role. People, who today are perceived as superior, have had a humble history. For example, a Head of State was once a boy. We should never be embarrassed by our miserable or hopeless situation in life. We only need to work hard to attain what we want.

*Wisdom does not necessarily go with age (kirira ti ukuru).* The proverb advises that one should not ignore some sentiments on the basis that a relatively younger person said them. Wisdom sometimes does not depend on age. A relatively younger person can give valuable insight that peers may not have observed or provided.

*He who asks the way does not get lost (Muria njira ndooraga).* The proverbs emphasizes that it is not foolish to ask when not sure. It is better to consult early enough than assume things only to discover that you have been on a wrong path all along.

*A good deed may turn round to your benefit. (Gwika wega kumathaga kungi).* It is like saying that, “God rewards our good deeds.” You may help someone in good faith only to find the same person in future very eager to help you in a difficult situation. Or you may find yourself in a similar situation and someone else behaves like an angel sent by God to your rescue.

*Negligence brings down a hive (Muhuthia urekagia mwatu).*

Overlooking or downplaying an important issue that needs attention may ultimately lead to heavy expenses. One may ignore a minor wheel problem in his or her car, like the breaking system, only to cause a fatal accident due to breaking failure. This will, of course, be regrettable.

### **Vii)Luhya**

The Luhya people live in western Kenya. Here are a few proverbs from their ethnic group:

*A pot breaks at the door-step. (Indabu yatishiranga khumuliango)* The proverb warns against over confidence. While performing an important task, one needs to be keen until the last minute. Relaxing before the completion of a task can be tragic. People are known to have knocked a tree in their compound or a gate or a house in the excitement of being home at last!

*A child is as good as her/his mother (omwana yalonda emima kwanyina).* The proverb emphasizes the significance of a mother in the socialization process of a child. Parents are a key factor in determining adolescent behavior (Sarason 1976). Parents are often teaching, by example, their children how to behave oblivious of the fact that they are doing so. Parents should teach in both word and deed. This proverb can enrich a theory of learning called Social Learning that was advanced by Canadian Professor Albert Bandura (1925- )

A behavioral therapy has also been adapted from the social learning theory (Corey, 2001)

*A good dancer dances in the arena once (Omucisini omulaywa ashinanga muse lulala).* The proverb warns against self-praise. Do not praise yourself. Let others praise you. Self-praise is unpleasant to the listener. It is like repeating a dance.

### **viii) Kiswahili**

The Swahili people are said to live in the coastal region of Kenya and Tanzania. They are believed to be the result of intermarriage between Arabs and Africans. Some Arabs that migrated to the East African coastal region intermarried with the Africans who lived along the coast, giving rise to the Swahili people (Encyclopedia Britannica 2013). Kiswahili is the national language of Kenya but also spoken in many other African countries like Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Mozambique and the Democratic Republic of Congo (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2013). Proverbs derived from the Swahili people are taught and examined in the Kenyan primary and secondary schools. Kiswahili is a compulsory subject at both levels. Here are a few Kiswahili proverbs:

*Follow the bees get the honey (Fuata nyuki ule asali).* The proverb encourages one to identify and pursue the source of what they need.



For example, to obtain education the student should keenly “pursue” the teacher and keenly study the discipline. In order to be a successful businessman one should learn the skills from a successful businessman. In other words, rely on experts for advise and not laymen.

*Asking does not mean one is foolish (Kuuliza si ujinga).* The proverb encourages people to seek guidance when they encounter difficulties instead of doing things in ignorance. It is not foolish to ask. Indeed it is wisdom. It is similar to the Kikuyu proverb discussed earlier: *He who asks the way does not get lost (Muria njira ndooraga).*

*Anger is loss (Hasira hasara).* Self control is an important virtue. Refrain from impulsive behavior while angry. People have been convicted of manslaughter as a result of anger. Anger can lead to grave losses. The proverb warns against reacting in anger. The results can be tragic.

*Patience pays (Mvumilivu hula mbivu).* The proverb teaches that patience is a virtue. Results of patient endurance can be highly rewarding. For example, most outstanding people in the society today had to endure demanding educational programs. Some very successful business men patiently endured a business that had poor returns initially. Patience is an important virtue in Christianity (James 5:7) and perhaps most other world religions.

*Ignore a crack and build a wall (Usipoziba ufa utajenga ukuta).* Ignoring small repairs may lead to an overhaul or a reconstruction. This proverb is similar to the Kikuyu proverb discussed earlier: *Negligence brings down a hive (Muhuthia urekagia mwatu).*

#### CONCLUSION

Proverbs and any other relevant wisdom of the past should not be ignored but used to enrich modern theories of guidance and counseling. As it is now, guidance and counseling is based on theories developed in the West. None of these theories utilizes traditional wisdom. Similarly, none of these theories have explored the value of traditional wisdom. Such wisdom is just mentioned and ignored (see Oketch and Ngumba, 1988). Though some psychologists have carried out studies based on proverbs, for example, the proverb, “birds of a feather flock together” and confirmed such proverbs through research, this is just a by- the- way ( Several studies have indicate that peer influence is determined by the degree to which their interests, attitudes and values resemble. Children judge their interests, values and attitudes based on peers with the likes and begin to form cliques, play groups and gangs on that basis (Lindgren 1980)). A more in-depth approach needs to be undertaken in order to formulate hypotheses generated from traditional wisdom, test such hypotheses through research, and incorporate

the findings into the science of modern guidance and counseling.

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