

# Miyambi ya m'Chichewa—Old Wisdom for New Realities

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## I. INTRODUCTION

*“I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favor to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all”.*

Ecclesiastes 9:11, KJV

*“Objective consideration of contemporary phenomena compels the conclusion that success or failure in competitive activities exhibits no tendency to be commensurate with innate capacity but that a considerable element of the unpredictable must inevitably be taken into account.*

A translation by George Orwell

This is an illustration of what I call the contrast between:

Poetry and prose

Proverbs and jargonese

Clarity of purpose and obfuscation

Beauty and the beast

As you'll have noticed, the first extract is a poem which is actually an extended proverb. The second one is a barbaric translation, something that would not be amiss in the *Congressional Record* or the *IMF Annual Report*. It lacks beauty and vigor, and is full of jargon and obfuscation.

Why am I here today, to paraphrase a famous, if lackluster, presidential candidate? The simple answer is that I'm here to talk about proverbs, miyambi, the wisdom of our ancestors.

What are proverbs anyway? I'd say most of you recognize one when you see one. But if you live an orderly life, or a pedantic one, here you go.

A proverb is a “brief popular epigram or maxim: an adage”, according to the Webster Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary. This precisely reminds me why my daughter sometime hates dictionaries—they often confirm how little you know. Anyway let’s just say that a maxim is a general or fundamental truth, or a rule of conduct.

There are many kinds of Chichewa proverbs, but perhaps this quotation best sums it.

*“Proverbs are a mirror in which a community can look at itself. They describe its values, aspirations, and preoccupations. Proverbs identify and dignify a culture, bringing life into wisdom, and wisdom into life.”*

Bishop Kalilombe

It’s important to underscore the fact that proverbs are derived from daily life, about things people see and care about. Thus you won’t find a Chichewa proverb about snow and ice, nor about sharks and dragons, nor yet about knights in shining armor, but about elephants and mice, hoes and spears, *bawo* and *nsima*. But as with proverbs everywhere in the world, they talk about love, fear, joy, disappointment, vice, sin, weather, fishing, hunting, friendship, war, and hunger.

Today I’ll talk about proverbs because I find them fun and fascinating. They’re a way to disarm your opponent, and to woe a foot-dragging friend; a way to discipline your child, and to sweet-talk your lover; a way to bring to laughter, and be merry. I want to show you that Chichewa proverbs have an amazing range of things to say about anything: love and joy, sadness and grief, truth and fibs, fishing and hunting, rain and sunshine, water and fire.

I’m not an academic, so I want to make this fun. It’s more to stimulate and titillate, rather than to inform and educate. In what follows I want to briefly describe to you a few interesting Chichewa proverbs, mainly because I do seriously think they do have something to say about modern life. And did you know, contrary to what most of you think, that there are some modern Chichewa proverbs?

I’ll start by talking about what I call popular proverbs. Then I’ll talk about modern proverbs, followed by what I call “*risqué*” proverbs, and then finally

my favorite ones. I'll mainly present a list of proverbs, choose and explain a few, and let you enjoy the rest.

## II. POPULAR PROVERBS

1. Chakudza sichiimba ng'oma
2. Mphwayi n'tsoka, phwiti adakwata njiwa
3. Angoni satha onse
4. Ali dere nkulinga utayenda naye
5. Apatsa mosiyana
6. Choipa chitsata mwini
7. Umanena chatsitsa dzaye kuti njovu ithyoke mnyanga
8. Chikomekome cha nkhuyu m'kati muli nyerere
9. Chosamva adachiphikira m'masamba
10. Nkhuku yanjiru siiswa
11. Ukakwera pansana panjovu, usamati kunja kulibe mame
12. Linda madzi apite ndiye udziti ndadala
13. Patsepatse nkulanda, mwana wamfulu adziwa yekha
14. Ukaipa dziwa nyimbo
15. Khwangwala wamantha adafa ndi ukalamba
16. Chisoni chidapha nkhwali
17. Atambwali sametana
18. Kukana nsalu ya akulu nkuviika
19. Mbuto ya kalulu inakula ntadzaoneni
20. Ichi chakoma, ichi chakoma pusi adagwa chagada

### **III. MODERN PROVERBS**

1. China nchina, chidakwa chinakana ngongole ya tiyi.
2. Usandisokosere nkulinga utamva
3. Chafuna mwina chiri kwa Mandala
4. Kanthu n'khama, nyerere inasenza mgolo wa dizilo
5. Kansalu wani mita, malamulo thoo!

#### IV. RISQUÉ PROVERBS

1. Kaitana kavula, ukachedwa ukapeza katavala
2. Kako nkako, uvundukula nupenya
3. Kunja nkupheto, sukuchedwa kugalamuka
4. Linda mphepo kuti uwone maliseche ankhuku
5. Chamuna sayanika
6. Mphwayi n'tsoka phwiti adakwata njiwa
7. Kamba anyelera amene wamtola
8. Kangachepe fungo nlamake
9. Nchiwuno mwa mwana simugwa nkuku
10. Chulutsa masamba kuti usagwire nsete

## **V. PERSONAL FAVORITES**

1. Ziri uku anabwera ndi mwendo wathabwa
2. Kako nkako uvundukula nupenya
3. China nchina, chidakwa chinakana ngongole ya tiyi
4. Kansalu wani mita, malamulo thoo!
5. Dzandidzandi sikugwa
6. Chakwathu nchakwathu, adamangira nkhokwe mnyumba
7. Lero lomwe linadetsa nthengu

## **VI. POSTSCRIPT: CHALLENGE PROVERBS**

1. Zoyera zidapha mbuzi
2. Kwazizira alibe mpani
3. Kupanda mchokero, mkamwini anachokera mamina