

African Proverbs

The proverbs of several African groups are presented here. They are listed by ethnic group, with the countries of origin in parentheses. Do any of these proverbs remind you of proverbs you already know? What is specifically African about them?

Jabo (Liberia)

One does not embrace the leopard.
It is not only giants that do great things.
If you have nothing you are anxious to please.
The man who listens is the one who understands.

Ashanti (Ghana)

One bird in your hand is better than ten birds in the sky.
When a nation is about to come to ruin, the cause begins in the homes of its people.
What is bad luck for one man is good luck for another.
No one knows the story of tomorrow's dawn.

Yoruba (Nigeria)

One who asks never loses his way.
A person who has only one set of clothing does not play in the rain.
However large the ear, it cannot hear seven speeches at once.
He whom one loves never does anything wrong.
A delicious stew does not last long in the pot.
A river does not flow so far that it forgets its source.
The path does not close on a man with a machete.

Baganda (Uganda)

Those who love each other need only a small place.
The man who has not carried loads himself does not know how heavy they are.
A tree does not fall on one who is not there.
Wherever the snail goes, there also goes the shell.
Words are easy, but real friendship is difficult.
Silence finished the argument.

Masai (Tanzania/Kenya)

Best of all advisors is the one who says what you would say.
The polite lie is better than the forceful truth.
The zebra does not despise its stripes.
Don't fight a lion with a stick.
The eye with hatred in it can bore through stone.
There is no hill that never ends.

Zulu (Zululand, South Africa)

Do not speak of a rhinoceros if there is no tree nearby.
Even when there is no cock, day dawns.
One does not follow a snake into its hole.
Magic takes time.