EVANGELISATION WITH PROVERBS AND SAYINGS

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This article argues for the potential that proverbs and sayings represent for Christian evangelisation. They can be seen as a result of the Spirit sowing seeds of wisdom in cultures long before the coming of missionaries.

Introduction[1]

Celebrating fifty years of the good news, faithful from the diocese of Wabag in Papua New Guinea made a ten day pilgrimage from Mount Hagen to Sari, following the footsteps of the first missionaries. By the ninth day many were weary and thirsty, caused not only by the dusty roads, but also the experience of the worst drought in living memory. Thousands gathered in the hot sun for an outdoor mass at the mission in Wabag. A national priest, Fr. Arnold Orowae, preached in both pidgin and the local Wabag language. He began his homily in Enga with the proverb *Endaki pengepi anda kambusaka kambenge*: "The water bottle breaks at the door of the house". The people smiled knowingly through dry lips. Literally the proverb refers to someone who travels to the spring to fetch water and returns home holding the water-gourd, only to stumble at the door of the house, dropping the fragile water container. It is a warning to people not to be self-complacent and think that a task is completed when it is not. The message was clear. The people on the pilgrimage knew they should keep their wits about them and resist any temptation to relax prematurely before reaching their goal.

In this paper, I will argue for the hidden potential of proverbs and sayings in evangelism, whether in catechesis, preaching or developing local theology. The data comes from the experiences of the church in Enga. However, the method and the underlying theme — that God's

word can be seen and understood in new ways through the wisdom found in Melanesian oral culture — should have universal significance. The paper also raises the theological issue of the Spirit sowing seeds of wisdom in cultures long before the appearance of missionaries.

Jesus and Folk Wisdom

Jesus often used parables and sayings to communicate the Good News (Mk 4: 34). In this way he linked his message with the folk wisdom of the people. Sometimes he would refer to proverbs that people knew, for example, "Doctor, cure yourself" (Lk 4:23), "Prophets are not without honor except in their own country and in their own house" (Mt 13:57), "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you" (Mt 7:12). Occasionally he used paradox or hyperbole, for example, "Those who try to make their own life secure will lose it..." (Lk 17:33). He even went beyond words to symbolic gestures, such as riding into Jerusalem on a donkey - a sign of humble status.

Jesus' parables and sayings connected with events in the lives of common people: "A sower went out to sow..."(Mt 13:3) "One sows, another reaps" (Jn 4:37). Parables do not simply connect life experience. They "intensify" it, linking with wisdom passed down though tradition. Some of the sayings attributed to Jesus are based on verses from the Proverbs of the First Testament, for example, the parable of the sensible man who built his house on rock (Mt 7:24, cf. Prov 12:7), or the parable about not taking the place of honour at a feast (Lk 14:8-10, cf Prov 25:6-7). How often do we make use of parables and proverbs in evangelisation?

Proverbs in Melanesian Tradition

Symbolic language is very common in the languages of Papua New Guinea, particularly in emotionally charged fields as religion and politics. The more abstract the concept or more deeply felt the experience, the greater the likelihood that it will be expressed in symbols.[2] Those

skilled in public speaking have developed oratorical skills using symbolic language which demands attention and stimulates the imagination. The language ranges from colourful sayings, metaphors and proverbs, to lengthy allegories and stories. In general symbols are referred to in pidgin as "tok bokis" (hidden language). In the Enga language there is an equivalent general term: *kongali pii* (Symbolic [lit: "opposite] speech"). However, there are various particular terms, for example: *waipi lalu* (lit: "spoken speech"), *wambatakae pii lapae singi* (lit: "traditional wisdom"), *pii opale mende lengeme* (lit: "common expression") and *maku yandaita* (lit: "closing speech"). The latter term is the preferred term for proverbs, indicating that a proverb might be a good way to summarise and end one's discourse. However, one might also classify some of these expressions as "proverbial metaphors" because elements within the phrase might change according to the creative ability of the speaker.

I have been collecting proverbs, proverbial metaphors, and saying for several years and now have over one thousand in the Enga language alone. I imagine that other languages in Papua New Guinea will have a similar rich heritage of local wisdom.

Occasionally I use such expressions as an aid in preaching, and have seen how effective a well chosen proverb or saying can be in arousing interest. For example, when explaining Phil 2:6-11 (.... though he was in the form of God, [he] did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited ...") I use the proverb, *Laima kaitinya katenge tala epenge*: "A cassowary that leaves the safety of the mountains and comes to the valley is killed." It is usually applied to an innocent person who gets blamed for some wrongdoing. The term for high forest is also used for "heaven", so the saying fittingly conveys the idea of a noble innocent person coming from above who was killed unjustly. People listened attentively as they gained new insights into Paul's message.

Proverbs and God's Word

Literal language is limited in its capacity to express religious and

aesthetic concepts. Symbolic language has greater potential for creating links between the known and the unknown or unthought. Biblical revelation contains many examples of symbolic language, particularly in books like the Song of Songs or Revelation. Such writings are highly symbolic, presenting a challenge of interpretation for the reader.

Most proverbs, including those found in the First Testament Book of Proverbs, show little obvious religions sentiment. Some appear to promote a self-interest that is at odds with the altruism of the Christian Gospel. However, proverbs illustrate wisdom - often secular - which links with a wisdom that has its source in the Creator. We read at the beginning of the Book of Proverbs, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction" (Prov 1:7).

The wisdom found in many pre-Christian cultures demonstrates how people value fairness, patience, kindness, trustfulness, self-control etc. Such qualities are identified in Gal 5:22 as fruits of the Spirit. Consider, for example, the proverb, *Yaka Kaiwe iti namandengeme namba epe namba epe lenge*: "The Kaiwe bird which does not have bright plumage is saying 'I am good', 'I am good.'" This proverb is used to confront selfish, vain persons, pointing out that they are making a lot of unfounded claims. Proverbs such as these are witnessing to values that come from the spirit of Truth, working with people in every age and in every culture.

If such truth and goodness has its source in God's Spirit, we should respect it, and, moreover, enlist the aid of such wisdom in our evangelisation effort. Etymologically a proverb is a "word" which takes the place of another (pro = instead of, verbum = word). Perhaps proverbs could be another means of proclaiming God's Word today? Where cultural wisdom found in proverbs and sayings support Christ's message we have a means of helping people to understand the message on their own terms. We should also be open to traditional wisdom helping to reveal insights into God's Word.

Values

I have participated in workshops in which Enga people met to discuss how proverbs provide insights into the values of the pre-Christian culture. Proverbs advise, and warn against acting foolishly. They teach wisdom and right living. Thus, they provide a window into people's worldview and store of moral values.

What sort of values emerge in Enga proverbs? With over a thousand proverbs, the choice is rather difficult. However, by looking at proverb clusters one finds recurring values such as the following: taking responsibility for one's actions, interdependence, sharing, and the value of life. The following four proverbs illustrate each of these values in turn.

Kandepeneme baanya pyaka lea nakandao umbi pyaka lelyamo lea: "The man from Kandep claims that another man has an erection and doesn't notice his own." Such a proverb might be aimed at someone who accuses another of wrongdoing, ignorant of the fact that the same accusations would apply to him. There are obvious parallels with Lk 6:41 about removing the plank from one's own eye.

Itapi yandalanya waingi mendenya minatala yandenge: "If you are cutting a branch hold on to another branch." This proverb is particularly applicable to someone who is planning to fight or to enter into a pig exchange. Support is the key to success.

Kana pyao pyasetal kaleta nyingi: "Throw away a stone and get a valuable shell." the proverb encourages people to give, even if what they have seems worthless. By giving, one stands the chance of receiving something much more valuable in return. In other words, generosity is good.

Anga ongo dee nyoo lee pingi: "You can replant pandanus." The proverb warns a person to be careful. One can replant the shoot from a tree, but when people die they are dead.

Shared Values

Many of the values found in Engan proverbs are quiet compatible with biblical values. For example, *Itapi koo dokome dii koaka mandenge*: "Bad plants bear bad fruit" (cf. Mt 12:33), "The tree is known by its fruit"), or, *Kyakangeme popo kate auu kaenge*: "The foolish person likes to accumulate red objects" (cf. Lk 18:24, "how hard it is for those who have wealth ..."). Moreover, it would be possible to illustrate many of the Commandments using proverbs, for example, *Mena ŋaŋa matakai watala naenge ongo koenge*: "A piglet that does not follow its mother does not grow well" (4th Commandment), or, *Akali taiyoko ongo kunao napenge*: "Human blood is hard to wash off." If you hit or kill someone you will have to live with the consequence (5th Commandment).

However, the importance of proverbs lies less in simple parallelism than a creative tension between the values concerned. For example, in the proverb above about human blood, the concern is not so much the inherent value of human life, as the requirement for the murderer to compensate for a homicide lest he be an object of an "eye for an eye" act of vengeance. The Commandment is about preserving the God-given gift of life whereas the proverb focuses on assuming responsibility after taking human life.

Gospel Reinterprets Traditional Values

Some creative Christians interpret traditional proverbs, giving them a new meaning for our situation today. They do not agree or ignore the traditional meaning. Rather, they appreciate that meaning and build upon it. Take, for example, the traditional proverb, *Maa yokonya yalu mange*: "Morning dew on a taro leaf." Traditionally the proverb is a warning that one should take as great a care as one would to prevent drops of water rolling off a taro leaf. Now Christians reinterpret it in terms of faith, with the Spirit being like the dew drops on the leaf. One should take great care lest one lose one's faith.

The following proverb provides another example of reinterpretation. *Laimame endaki nengenya elyo pyata mapu nengenya elyo pyata*: "The cassowary bends its neck to eat alternatively food and water." Domesticated cassowaries are dangerous and are kept in cages with small openings for their heads to reach out for food or water. The proverb is used for a person who tries to be part of two groups at the same time, the implication being that he or she owes true allegiance to neither. Today people apply the proverb to "movement Christians" who go from some church movement to another, or from one church to another. The implied value is faithfulness and commitments to one cause.

Sometimes gospel values confront traditional values. For example, there is a traditional proverb, *Endame ita kisala naenge*, "Women do not climb trees." In fact, some women do climb trees - pandanus for instance. However, the proverb is used against women to tell them that they are unable to do what men do. With some notable exceptions women are generally treated as equals in Christian circles, and so today the proverb above would be confronted with Gal 3:28, or perhaps contrasted with another proverb: *Petokopi lapotame tapenge*: "You can pick up things with a pair of tongs." Tongs have two parts that work together. One part would be useless. So, if men and women cooperate and work together they can accomplish something.

Engan Proverbs Contribute New Insights

The proverbs workshops are an opportunity for lively discussion which goes on late into the night. People are fascinated by the wealth of traditional wisdom and work tirelessly to apply or reinterpret proverbs for their lives today. Working with proverbs sometimes contributes new insights into the Word and what it means to live with it.

For example there is a significant Enga proverb cluster about the power of the word. They include the following:

Piimi lao endaki tokopi uanga pingi: "Words bend bridges."

Pii ongome yuu kame pingi: "Words build fences."

Mena kendeme anjingi, akali piimi: "Pigs are restrained by ropes, men by words."

Wapaka ipanya singi piimi lao nyingi: "Words can get fish out of water."

Piimi lao paina pisingi: "Words can produce a fine day."

Lyaa itame pii pingi, akali piimi lenge: "Use supportive talk as a stick supports sugarcane."

Isa-kaita pii ongo aingi mende lelyamopa pingi: "A whisper indicates something big."

The meanings should be fairly obvious. However, I will briefly explain the first two. To build a bridge, many people have to cooperate, and there are often disagreements about how the work should proceed. Too much talk will result in a poorly constructed bridge. On the other hand, words build fences when words are used prudently in a way that will establish boundaries between disputing parties, thus contributing to the resolution of the problem.

In Melanesia speech is much more important than the written or printed word. Thus it is said that Melanesia has a characteristically oral culture. This may be seen in the displays of oratory skills in large public gatherings or in story-telling at home. Words carefully chosen and used prudently are powerful enough to bring welfare or harm. This insight can aid evangelisation in several ways. Firstly, in an oral culture, we need to orient our catechesis so that we use expressions that can be easily understood and memorised. Long texts translated from English or other languages are difficult to follow. Proverbs and sayings will help here. Secondly, we have yet to appreciate the value of good preaching which builds on the oratorical skills admired in the culture. Politicians are better than priests in this regard (cf. Lk 16:8). Thirdly we can build

upon the sense of the God's word which does not return "without carrying out my will and succeeding in what it was sent to do" (Is 55:11). *Piimi ipa lyoo pilyina lenge*: "Words can change the direction of a river." The Word of God can change direction of people's lives.

Proverbs and Sayings from the Christian Experience

Proverbs pack long experience into short sentences. For fifty years now people have heard the good news and experienced Christian life. One might expect that some new proverbs and sayings are emerging from that experience. In fact, songs and prayers in the local language contain many symbols and creative images, new proverbs, however, are a rarity indeed. People prefer to reinterpret traditional proverbs, as shown above. For example, these days in Papua New Guinea there are some prophets of doom going around predicting the end of the world in the year 2000. Those sceptical of such prophets use the traditional proverb, *Aiyu naipanya kaiti katenge*: "Thunder that brings no rain."

Occasionally people today will create proverbial metaphors for effect. While campaigning, before his assassination, the Member of Parliament Malipu Balakau was famous for saying, *Poo lalyo lelyamo ongo lanao lata*, "The wind blowing up will blow down." He was referring to power and influence moving from the mountains of Enga to the parliament on the coast in Port Moresby. Now Christian evangelists use a similar saying to refer to their mission. *Endaki lalyoo epelyamo ongo lanao pena lamana*: "The river running up to the West must run down to the East." Missionaries came up stream towards the West, and now it is time for the local people to evangelise down stream to the East. The compass bearing is unimportant. As the saying indicates, their concern is reverse mission so that they in their turn might share the Good News.

Limitations

While proverbs and saying sayings may be helpful in evangelisation, there are some limitations to be aware of. The effective

use of proverbs is impossible for those unfamiliar with the language, culture and experience of the people. With modern Western education, many young people have almost no knowledge of the proverbs of their parents. Consequently few feel confident entering into this field. However, I have witnessed how some young people become quite fascinated when introduced to this symbolic dimension of their traditional oral culture.

Another limitation is the culture specific nature of proverbs. Thus, in catechetical materials distributed nationally, proverbs could be used only in a generic form. To be effective, proverbs would have to be reworked for each language group. This is not as formidable as initially one might imagine. Teaching at the seminary, I sometimes use the example of an Engan proverb, and students, especially those from the highlands will often say, "We say something similar, like ....", and they will go on to relate a proverb or saying with much the same meaning in their own language.

The content of some proverbs or the value promoted may impose limitations on their usefulness for evangelisation. For example the proverb, *Endombakeme pongo paka kaele napi*: "Don't be like an old woman acting as though she is afraid of a man's penis," might not be considered good taste in a Christian context. However, one need not agree with the sentiments expressed in every proverb. One could use Jesus' method and offer an alternative, "You have been told, but I say ..." For example, consider the saying, *Yuwipi taiyoko palengeaka*: "Even rats have blood." This would normally be used in the context of tribal warfare indicating that one should kill even the most insignificant person from the enemy clan. A Christian evangelist would counter the saying with teaching on human dignity and the value of human life.

Finally, one must also be careful that proverbs do not overshadow the Gospel. Proverbs and sayings are helpful in evangelisation to the extent that they complement and contribute new insights into the Word of God.

Conclusion

In his book, *Constructing Local Theologies*, Robert Schreiter describes four forms of theological reflection: variations on a sacred text, theology as wisdom, theology as sure knowledge, and theology as praxis. This paper demonstrates faith seeking understanding in the wisdom tradition. I have given examples of 27 Engan proverbs, proverbial metaphors, and sayings to illustrate how the Word can be seen and understood in new ways through the wisdom found in Melanesian oral culture.

Paul VI's Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975) helps us realise that evangelisation is a complex process. Paul VI says that what matters is to evangelise cultures not in a decorative way, as it were, by applying a thin veneer, but in a vital way, in depth and right to their very roots (*EN* 18). My experience of working with Engan proverbs convinces me that proverbs and sayings give us valuable insights into the worldview and values of a culture. Thus, they provide a way of facilitating the dialogue that will precede any radical transformation.

Western orientated school education has undermined traditional ways of passing on wisdom from proverbs and sayings. Perhaps now is a good time to rethink how tradition, including traditional proverbs, could be included in our sharing of the Gospel. This could be one way of interpreting the Gospel, linking it to the linguistic heritage of a people, and incarnating it in the experience of faith today.

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ENDNOTES

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2. See the informative paper by P. Brennan, "Enga Referential Symbolism: Verbal and Visual," in P. Brennan (ed.), *Exploring Enga Culture: Studies in Missionary*