

It Takes a Whole Village to Raise a Child

**African Proverb of the Month
November 1998**

Igbo and Yoruba (Nigeria) Proverb

Explanation:

This Igbo and Yoruba (Nigeria) proverb exists in different forms in many African languages. The basic meaning is that child upbringing is a communal effort. The responsibility for raising a child is shared with the larger family (sometimes called the extended family). Everyone in the family participates especially the older children, aunts and uncles, grandparents, and even cousins. It is not unusual for African children to stay for long periods with their grandparents or aunts or uncles. Even the wider community gets involved such as neighbors and friends. Children are considered a blessing from God for the whole community. This communal responsibility in raising children is also seen in the Sukuma (Tanzania) proverb "One knee does not bring up a child" and in the Swahili (East and Central Africa) proverb "One hand does not nurse a child."

In general this Nigerian proverb conveys the African worldview that emphasizes the values of family relationships, parental care, self-sacrificing concern for others, sharing, and even hospitality. This is very close to the Biblical worldview as seen in scripture texts related to unity and cooperation (Ecclesiastes 4:9,12) and a mother's self-sacrificing love (Isaiah 49:15-16).

The multiple uses of this Nigerian proverb show the timeliness and relevancy of African proverbs in today's world. In 1996 Hillary Clinton, the wife of the President of the United States, published a book on children and family values entitled "It Takes a Village" based on this proverb. That same year Maryknoll Father Don Sybertz and I published the first edition of our book "Towards An African Narrative Theology" (now available from Paulines Publications Africa, Nairobi, Kenya and Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, USA). In Chapter Three on "Community" we used this Nigerian proverb and many other African proverbs and sayings on the values of community, unity, cooperation and sharing. In Dallas, Texas there was a controversy over four security guards that whipped some kids who broke into a mall. The parents of the kids said that the guards had no right to discipline their kids, but the guards said that they did what they did because "the village raises the children."

The Anglican Archbishop John Sentamu of York, England at a consultation in Swanwick, England in September, 2005 stated: "*As It takes a whole village to raise a child so it takes the whole global village to eradicate poverty.* It starts with each of us personally. [For example] do we buy Fairtrade goods?"

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