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Dzedzere-dzedzere salingana nkugweratu: Collection of 1000 Chewa proverbs. By Toon van Kessel. Lusaka, Zambia: FENZA Press, 2015. Pp. 236.

The title of the book is proverb 175, “Stumble is not the same as falling flat,” which is explained, “Even if I do not do a perfect job, I have tried, and the result is not too bad. Accept a limited contribution, imperfections.” This proverb is a humble statement for a wonderful book.

The subtitle uses the word “Chewa”, which refers to the ethno-linguistic community of people who speak the “Chichewa” language. In the literature about these people and their language, many writers have used these words interchangeably.

This a book is a good example of the type of printed collections we have often seen, used, and benefitted from. In this it is complete: over 1,000 proverbs, each proverb is spelled out in Chichewa, then translated into English, followed by explanatory notes regarding culture and application of the proverb. Plus, each entry has certain key words linked to the thematic index to the collection. All of this is familiar and very good.

But, in addition to the printed book, this book is paired with a free website where readers can do additional kinds of research and analysis: <http://www.fenza.org/chewaproverbs.php>.



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The website does not list out the proverbs with their translations and explanation. Rather, it only allows the user to search for strings of text. Each element of this innovative, two-part format allows readers to do more kinds of research.

For example, long before I ever held the printed book, by searching the website I was able to identify wellerism proverbs in this collection by clicking the box “In English translation” then searching for “said”. But now, by reading through the printed book itself, I found additional wellerism proverbs, e.g. “‘Intentionally’ the chick *cried*, while its mother is right there” (#167), where “cried” is the speech verb instead of “said”. Also, by searching via the website, I was able to easily note the frequency of words in the translations or in the explanations. For example, 10 with “elephant”, 12 with “snake” (but none with “python”), none with “scorpion”, 24 with “tree”, 16 with “house”, 4 with “tobacco”, 2 with “baby”, none with “donkey”, etc. The metaphorical nature of proverbs seen in the fact that 10 of them use the word “elders” in their explanations, but only three use “elders” in their translations. It is fascinating to note that there are no examples of the singular form “elder” in either the translations or the explanations.

By attentively reading through the book itself, I was able to find a variety of poetic artistry, such as the repeated sequences of *u-consonant-a* in proverb 393:

Kupha n'kupha, umakumbuka poguza.” (Note: *ph* stands for a single consonant sound.)

Also, attentive reading of the book allows us to find examples of artistic alliteration in proverb 15: *Akulu-akulu ndi m' dambo mozimira moto.* “Elders are (like moisture) in the marsh where fire will extinguish.”

In the future, we can hope that more collections of proverbs will be available with online formats that allow us to do these complementary kinds of study.

The website that allows searching the Chewa proverb database also allows searching a collection of over 1,700 Bemba proverbs (Zambia) collected by the late Rev. Frank Carey, like Toon van Kessel a member of the Catholic order Missionaries of Africa (White Fathers). Searching the Bemba database is useful in itself (I was able to find a few wellerism proverbs), but I am

very quickly reminded of the advantages of having a printed copy to read, also, as with the Chewa collection.

The proverbs are presented in strict alphabetical order. This allows readers to notice patterns at the beginning of proverbs, such as three that begin with *Safunsa* “The one who did not ask...” (#859-861). This highlights the number of proverbs about seeking advice. Similarly, we find three proverbs beginning with *Dziko* “nation”, reminding people that the Chewa people must act within the context of being part of the Chewa nation. Finding 11 proverbs that begin with *Tsoka* “misfortune/bad luck” makes it clear that this is an important concept among the Chewa.

There are a number of proverbs that contain a quotation without a speech verb, the quotation is understood as characterizing a character’s actions and attitude, often with “Mr.” in the translation, #887 “*Tidzaona mawa*” *adagoneka munda*. “Mr. ‘We shall see tomorrow’ let his garden lie uncultivated (and had nothing to eat).” This is an intriguing construction. However, “Mr.” cannot be found by searching on the internet since a search string has to be at least three *letters* long, so this type of proverb can only be found by reading the book. These quotation proverbs are often formed with reduplication, #892 *Tiyeni-tiyeni...* which is translated, “The one who says ‘Let’s, let’s go’...”.

The thematic index contains nearly 600 entries, such as “reputation”, “forgiveness”, “stubbornness”, “discretion”. Some entries have only one proverb, such as “focus”. Other entries have many entries, such as 27 for “arrogance”, 20 for “friends”, 28 for “covetousness”, and 34 for “effort”. The index can also be searched on the Web. It is a very useful addition to the collection of proverbs.

This is an excellent book, but there are a few small ways the book could have been improved. For example, the spelling system used for transcribing the proverbs is not explained. This makes it difficult to understand the level of detail needed to discern and appreciate the sound-based art found in some proverbs. Also, some of the translations contain Chichewa words that are not translated into English, e.g. #376 “By saying ‘I can, I can’ the *nyamnthambwe* got into trouble.” What is a *nyamnthambwe*? (There is a Chichewa dictionary that is accessible via the proverb

website, but this dictionary does not give a translation for this word.) These are minor quibbles about a great book.

For those who enjoy collections of proverbs, who study the proverbs of southern Africa, or those who work on comparative proverb studies, this is a wonderful book.

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