

The Elders' Stomach Ache
An Informal Essay on Two Proverbs in Wapan.

Abuju wà dzwándzwan ci báci; afin wà tūtú ci báculo.
(Chewing food is for children; the stomach ache is for the adults.)

At first glance this is a simple enough proverb; it expresses the universal problem that adults face when charged with the deeds of their children: in other words, the child does the misdeed, but the parent, or elder, bears the responsibility for it.

But the simple proverb takes on added depth when one learns a little more about the Wapan. For instance, there is a social fiction stemming from ancient times that the elders of the tribe, the báculo, never eat food. Likely this developed long ago as an expression of the Wapan's sense that in some very real sense the heads of each compound or each clan shared in some significant ways the superhuman qualities represented most fully in the Aku Uka, the chief of Wukari, who is acknowledged by the Wapan as the representation of God on earth. At any rate, in Wapan, one never says of an elder (male, that is) that he is eating. Nor does one say that he is sleeping, or washing, or urinating, etc. And a true elder is never seen taking food either. He drinks his brewed guinea-corn beer in the proper enclosures, and eats his evening meal, the only meal of the day, in a sacred enclosure where women, children and non-elders may not enter.

Given the above description, it is all the more interesting that eating and stomach aches are used to describe the relationships between the elders and the children. The purpose of this essay is to point out some of the richness of this proverb and a related one, and to suggest that they may teach us missionaries things we need to know if we are to preach the risen Christ in such a way that he may be apprehended by the elders.

This of course implies that at present such preaching is not going on. To make a generalization such as that would be foolish. Scripture and common sense tell us that nothing that is good springs from a rotten source, and the fact that the Christian church among the Wapan has its share of genuine saints laboring for the gospel means we cannot overlook the present power of the church and of individual witnesses within and without it to bring Christ to the tribe. Nevertheless, the church works mainly among the young and disaffected, and not one of the Wapan communities number a single traditional elder among the practitioners of daily Christianity. One may defend this situation by explaining that no Christian would be permitted to become an elder, but the real point is that Christ and his church want all the Wapan, and not only those who have renounced positions in the traditional social structure. The object of the church and mission must be a redeemed society, where the Wapan society continues, purified and redeemed, its laws and prophets purified and fulfilled by the power of the Lord of creation. This today is not the case. The church and the traditional society exist side by side, viewing each other as theoretical enemies but resting their cases. The church picks up the disaffected, the dissatisfied, those who would be modern, but it has not preached a message that has reached the hearts and minds of the tribe. Why? Perhaps we can find some of the problems in the proverb we are discussing, and also some of the solution.

The first thing to notice is that the relationship between the elders and the children is a two-way affair. ^{But} After all, it is the "non-eating" elders who initially provided the food for the children, establishing their relationship as providers and protectors. The children too, reap an added benefit in that they need not suffer the pains of their misdeeds. So far this is all one-way: the elders provide the food, they also take the consequences if it is bad. The báculo teach the báci, and if the báculo have taught wrongly, the blame is upon them. Where is the other side of the coin? What must the children do? The Wapan know well the other side of the coin; they see the relationship between elders and youth as clearly reciprocal, and they express it in many ways. One oblique expression can be found in a second proverb:

Anù byin mbyà nu yo-a, dzwan je.

(The kid goat watches his mother's mouth, then eats leaves.)

I learned this proverb in this fashion. In the village where we do our language learning, a group of young Christian men were eating a meal in the area which serves for a village square. They followed the tradition that men and women never eat together, but they had departed from the tradition that men always eat in private and never where they can be seen by passersby and women and children. Though I ate with them, I later crossed the square to a group of the elders reclining in the shade of some large trees. The village chief and some of his officials were there and in the course of conversation I asked them whether they approved of the fact that the Christian men ate in the open. They then gave me this proverb as answer, and when I asked for its meaning they added another which, roughly, says Water always travels the correct road. They then added a series of questions to which the obvious answer was always no, such as Did you give birth to yourself? and Did your child bear himself?

What is the meaning? The meaning is that there is a fund of wisdom available which describes the only correct time-tested way to live, and no one acquires this fund of wisdom on his own, but rather by the natural means of learning from the elders, who in the past learned from their elders. A kid avoids poisonous leaves by eating the leaves which its mother learned were safe from watching her mother. Water never runs uphill, but will always take the natural course. In short, these young Christians were fools, knowing the proper and acceptable way to eat, having been taught by the elders, but pursuing what to the Wapan is an unnatural course, regardless of the consequences.

And what are the consequences? The consequences are that those who fail to follow the proven paths, trod by the ancients, separate themselves from their forefathers until they no longer know who they are. For the essence of membership in a tribe is to feel sure of your relationships and to know that they are being maintained.

So the elders teach the children and assume full responsibility for them. At the same time, if the children have any sense at all, they will follow to the letter the teachings of the elders, trusting that the learning of the elders is not theirs alone, but belongs to the whole history of the tribe. The benefit to the children is that by such attentive following, they can be sure they are pursuing a correct course, and they can have the comfort of knowing the bacò will assume responsibility for them.

But what is the benefit to the elders themselves? To get at this in a round-about way, let us examine the meaning of the Wapan word, wa.

Wa is a verb, and the first meaning I wrote down for it is worship. I got this by simply asking a Christian what was the word for worshipping God. He said "I ri wa Cidon." (We will worship God). There is another wa, which means to drink, and this I listed, correctly, I think, as a different word altogether.

Several months after I had learned the meaning of the word for worship, I was at a dinner given by the Christian leaders of Wukari for Miss Dorothy Sytsma shortly before she left for a furlough. When in the course of the meal I poured out a glass of water for Pastor Habila, the pastor of Wukari Church, he smiled and said, "Ase, ù kan nu wà ri wa bacò re." (So! You've become a child who will worship the elders?) The sentence of course made little sense to me, until it was explained that the word wa means to serve, in the sense of bringing food and drink to someone more important than yourself. At first I took this as a separate meaning from the word for worship, and thus I had a new word for my dictionary, but as we shall see, the word serve and worship in Wapan are the same word, with deep implications for both Christianity and traditional religion. To illustrate the meaning of wa, I shall first present what I understand of its function in the traditional worship and life of the non-Christian, and then comment on its relationship to the message of Christianity.

The most straightforward definition of wa is to serve, and it implies the two-way relationship which we have been circuitously describing. Anù wà ri wà báçò, the child who serves the elder(s), has at least two meanings. It can refer to a child, or youth, who has the special position of carrying food into a sacred enclosure, or performing other minor duties for the elder. Or it can simply describe the attitude of a young person, meaning that he is a child who is willing to be of service to the elders. At any rate the meaning of wa is most clearly symbolized in carrying food or drink to an elder. Behind this act of service is the understanding that it has great importance, because the elder is the one who is responsible for the welfare of the child involved. In oversimplified terms, the child serves the elder, and the elder protects the child. This is the meaning of wa.

How then does it become a word for worship? With elegant simplicity and with a depth of meaning I fear few of us will ever understand, it becomes worship because what the child carries out in relationship to the elder, the elder carries out in relationship to those elders who have previously died. Anù ri wà báçò, báçò ri wà ki. (The child serves the elder, the elder serves the ki.)

Now, to understand wa we must comprehend the meaning of ki. We began by quoting a proverb with a simple meaning. I hope that by the end of this essay it will be clear that we have not departed from our subject. But to do it justice we must fit it into the system of thought and behavior in which it acquires its fullest meaning; otherwise our translating is merely mechanical work, and will teach us nothing and finally result in poor translation. So forgive me as I seem to digress more and more: I am still discoursing on the elders' stomach ache.

Ki can mean death, as in the phrase nyúnù ki-a, the day of his death. Or ki can mean the departed dead themselves, inhabitants of a rather purgatorial realm called Kindo. Ki is a singular word, and the plural word is bakindo. Bakindo is often used to refer to the dead of the tribe, but it also refers to the items we, with usually a derogatory emphasis, call the fetish. Apà wà ri wà ki is, then, the term for a man who serves the fetish. And it is ki as fetish that we must attempt to understand.

To translate ki as fetish is almost meaningless in English, since most of us have no idea at all what the fetish is. Furthermore, because of previous training we are predisposed to believe that, whatever it is, it is something bad. The word fetish itself in English derives third or fourth hand from Latin facticus, and connotes falsehood. The primary meaning Webster's Seventh New Collegiate gives it is; "an object believed among a primitive people to have magical power to protect or aid its owner." The definition itself labels the object and the belief as unworthy of serious consideration, and as such is more a detriment than a help.

It must be understood that both the word fetish in English and ki in Wapan can have a very flippant and unimportant sort of meaning. If I say "Clothes are a fetish with him," I am reducing the word to only a portion of its potential content. Similarly, a man may point to an object thrust into the rafters of his house and say that it is a ki, and mean no more than that he takes it to be a sort of rabbit's foot that will bring good luck to him and his own. But this is not the primary meaning as far as I can make out.

In a Wapan compound, if you are permitted to see the area reserved for the ki, you will see perhaps a grove of trees and by the foot of four or five of these trees you will see a small cone-shaped pillar of mud, or a broken pot or two. They may seem old and unattended, but they will bear the stains of libations or pouring-out of guinea-corn beer specially prepared for wa ki. It will strike you with surprise that such unprepossessing objects are called ki, but you will notice that great powers are ascribed to the ki, and that there are some ki who are considered far more important than others. To the question, "Show me a ki," you will be pointed to one of these cones or pots, and you may conclude that the Wapan worship idols, and not even nicely made ones at that. But I submit it is not so.

I submit that the Wapan are carrying out the idea of wa, or service, in a manner entirely meaningful to a tribe that believes that its dead have a life after death and maintain interest in their descendants on earth.

A systematic explanation would go something like this. A child knows that the owner of the compound takes care of him and is interested in his welfare. Thus, if he is a good child, he does all he can to be of service to the owner of the compound (who would be his father, or his grandfather, or his father's older brother). But eventually the child himself becomes a father, and the previous owner of the compound dies. At this point Western Society would bury the man, print an obituary, put his portrait on a grand piano, and attempt to forget him until the judgement day. But the Wapan will not do so. They sense that the dead are still alive, and still continue their interest in the living. Thus when the compound head dies and the child takes his place, he will continue serving the old compound head. Instead of taking him food and drink as before when he was present as a living person, he will bring the ritual drink to the proper ki and pour it there. Instead of talking to the compound head as before, he will talk before the ki. While the previous compound head was serving that particular ki, its place and meaning represented his own fathers and their fathers. Now he has joined them, and the child takes his place. Meanwhile, younger children will bring the new compound head his food and drink at the appropriate place and time. The child serves the elders and the elders serve the ki.

If the first type of service is not worship, then neither is the second, at least not in Wapan eyes. A child serves the elders because they care for him; similarly the same service is rendered to the dead elders by the living, because the relationship between them has not been broken by death; the Wapan are convinced that a dead compound head is fully as interested in the welfare and fully as insistent upon proper behavior of the people in his compound as he was when living.

It can be seen too, that this is still a two-way relationship. If the living compound head has no children, who will help him with his food and other things? Similarly, if a dead elder has no son trained to carry out the proper actions before the ki, how is the relationship between the living and dead to be maintained? In a very real sense the survival of the elder, both on earth and in death, depends upon the children, just as for safety and welfare, the children look to the elders, living and dead, to provide it.

This then is the system. Many do not understand it. They only sense that the most important thing for their continued well-being is that they carry out the traditions taught by their fathers. In a sense they are like the bulk of Christians who live by the rules and never grasp the intricacies of the theology underlying their actions. But just as the theology of the Christian is deep and real, so the underlying assumptions of the Wapan are deep, and also real.

Let me digress again for the sake of an illustration. When my mother's oldest sister died, and again when my mother's father died, I myself went through a short period of prayers to the dead. At the time I didn't discuss these prayers with anyone because I suspected they were not quite theologically acceptable. But I suspect now they were born of something that the Wapan sense deeply; there is life after death, and a relationship between the living and the dead must be maintained by the living, or else the relationship dies. In my prayers, (I was about fifteen at the time) I prayed first to my aunt, and later, after he died, to my grandfather. I asked them, if perchance they were permitted to speak to Christ, to remember me at that time. That was all I said. Then I would pray a "normal" prayer to God.

After a year or two, I learned enough theology to stop these prayers. But what I now know, upon reflection, is that when I stopped, I lost a sense of the immortality of those dead relatives. Every day, in the evening, when I prayed those prayers, I was again made aware that they had only died, that they had not ceased to be. When I stopped those prayers, they ceased to be, at least in relationship to me. Today, even if I wanted to, I could not begin again praying to them; my sense of immortality is not strong enough to justify the effort. In a real

Two things in Western Culture, I suggest, tend to curtail our ability to accept the importance of maintaining relationships with the dead. One is technology and the search for new solutions to old and new problems. We teach and are taught that the essence of technological progress is the readiness to abandon old techniques in favor of newer more profitable ones. Obviously one must still know something about past ways, but he need not revere those ways to any extent at all. Thus we feel no great dependency upon the wisdom of our dead; they have left their books behind them, and we accept and reject their contents as we find practicable in today's world.

The second thing is a simplistic view of the resurrection, at least among Christians. This tends to suggest that at some final day all the dead will be made alive again, but that from the time of their death till that day they have no existence, in short they are related to nothing at all. More sophisticated people obliterate the concept of time in favor of dimensions and thus dismiss the problem of the state of today's dead as simply an error of viewpoint in human thinking, but the net effect is the same: when a man dies in Western culture, he ceases to exist in relationship to the daily lives of the living, and no one is concerned or bothered by this at all.

What we are trying to describe is a very tightly organized conceptualization of the meaning of existence. The child serves the elder and will one day become one. The elder serves the ki and will one day become one. And the ki? Strictly speaking, though the people aren't all clear on this, the ki have no power on their own. One elder described them to his son (now a pastor) in this way, "God has given us the ki to talk to because He Himself is far away, and the ki can hear what we are saying." This simply extends the relationship between God and man's authority to the realm beyond death. It is not an attempt to usurp God's power or majesty any more than a powerful living leader's instructions are: it is instead the expression of a consciousness of the role the dead play after their death.

Let us now describe how this works out in Wapan life, and see if it has anything to say to us about mission practices and the message of Christ.

In the evening, a compound head enters his eating enclosure and takes his ritual meal. The enclosure suggests he is taking his meal with his ancestors, though people explain simply that it is a "thing of shame" for an elder to eat in public. Then after the meal, he sits in his compound and receives the young men who come to greet him. If a youngster has done wrong that day, he will be reproved, if he's done well he may be sent away commended. Every day the compound head notes who among the young men come faithfully, and who do not. Among the faithful ones, he notes who learn his instructions carefully, who follow his advice, who, in short, are the wise men and who are the fools. (Another proverb in Jukun translates as The fool hears with his ears, the wise man puts the words on his shoulders.) From among these young men he will someday choose the man or men to whom he will teach the proper way to serve the ki. When the compound head dies, this man, if only one is chosen, will take the departed man's place in carrying out the rituals; others of his compatriots may enter the enclosure of the ki and watch him (this is called taa ki, to do ki) but he alone will say the proper words and do the proper actions, and the meaning of many of the words and actions will be secret to him alone. Thus he will enjoy a prestige among the others. When sicknesses strike, or famine, he will be looked to to carry out whatever rituals the diviners suggest will be best. It should be remembered, though, that he did not get his prestige by chance, he earned it by scrupulously serving his former compoundhead: he was the child who served the elder, and now has become the child who serves the ki. He too, will choose from among the children the best among them who will be fit to learn his secrets.

We are describing the two-way relationship between elders and children which make the elder's stomach ache. But how does this affect the mission and the Church of Christ among the Wapan?

There are several ways in which this system vitally affects the mission. Because this is a first draft, I list them as they occur to me and not in order of importance.

One is seen in the way the mission (and the government) educates the young in the schools. We have seen that the young who would become successful in the Wapan system must learn to show respect, and listen carefull and follow exactly the advice of the old. We have also seen that the proecess of selecting the worthy young is done by day-by-day observation by the elders to see who among the children know how to serve the elders properly. This carries over into the indigenous church too. The elders of the church are constantly watching the young to find who among the young know how to come to the elders and give them the service due them.

But the mission and and the government tend to pull children out of the environment where the elders can scrutinize their behavior, and systematically teach them that new ways must be preferred to old. This is not wrong in itself, but it is very wrong if those young are not taught how to behave within the system itself. In the compound they learn the system by living it, in the schools they must learn it through the teaching. This means practical courses in black-culture in our mission schools. But at the moment very little is being done. I have talked to students who insist that when they go to their villages on holiday the elders should shake their hand and not expect the formal kneeling that makes up part of the correct greeting in Wapan. The notion that we can alienate a student to that degree seems hideous to me, but it is a fact that that particular student was not at all alone. I submit that until we demand that our teachers get thouroughly immersed in understanding the African life about them, the work of the schools will be severely limited insofar as it is our desire that students return to effective leadership in villages. Today many return in government positions and live as virtual strangers in towns of their own tribe.

A second way in which the system affects the mission is this. When a Wapan man become a Christian, he gives up the ritual apparatus of his former system, but he does not give up the thinking behind it. He has no new culture to substitute for the old, nor should he. The result is that the "elders stomach ache" shows up in the church as well. If we cannot understand this we will be endlessly frustrated by what might be called syncretism in the Wapan church of Christ. By syncretism I mean the combination of two different forms of belief, the Wapan way of ki and the traditions of Western Christianity. This syncretism shows itself in two distinct ways, but in both it is the expression of the belief that the child serves the elder and the elder serves the ki.

The first and obvious type of syncretism is that if a man already introduced to serving ki is won to Christianity, he is very likely to continue some practices of the fetish along with his new-found faith in Christ. This is because to him the ki is not a meaningless thing at all; it is the essence of revering the elders. In Wapan the ki in no way compete with God, no more than our fathers do in our system. The Wapan outside of the Christian church never wa Cidon (serve God); they always nya Cidon (praise God) or vo Cidon (ask of God). Thus the initial message of the church, which is Stop the practice of wa ki, and wa Cidon instead, can have very little meaning. Since the church has no understandable information to offer the Wapan regarding what to do about his dead elders here and now, it is not surprising, nor should it be particularly upsetting, that a new Christian, already introduced to ki, will not be able to depart from it. There are many implications here for the mission and the church, but I will now proceed to a subtler form of the same thing.

The bulk of today's Christians among the Wapan are recruited from the ranks of young men before they are introduced to the secrets of the ki ritual. When this happens, there is no chance of their serving ki, because no elder will agree to teach a Christian the old way, since he has not been faithful in following it, at least in the eyes of the traditional religionist. Now one would think that, closed off from access to ki, the system would break down. In fact it does not.

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We have said before that the system is expressed in the notion
that the child serves the elder and the elder serves the ki. Further,
we have made clear that the ki must in no way be confused with God;
rather the ki are the essence of the ancient elders in their relationship
with the living.

When one wapan who have not learned how to serve ki enter the church,
they still, unless they are among the very small minority who are so
Western that they are no longer Wapan, take over the system that the
child serves the elder and the elder serves the--what fits in the place
of the ki. The ancient elders of the church and their teachings. Thus
one finds in the church a fantastic reluctance among the older pastors
to re-examine the teachings of the first missionaries, and one finds
a similar reluctance among the younger pastors to oppose the teachings
of their elders, even though privately they may make it clear they
know they are standing on solid ground. It may seem ludicrous to think
that Rev. Ed Smith has joined the "Christian ki," if I may call them
that; but it is quite true. When the suggestions of the Ecumenical
Council regarding the baptism of men and their wives who were polygamous
before hearing the Word were discussed, the older pastors made the
observation that there would be no way to change the stand of the church
on this problem unless Rev. Smith himself would return to Nigeria to
tell the church that the oldest missionaries may have been in error on
this point. A pronouncement of the mission as a whole would not, I
suspect, have the same effect. Rev. Smith has become a substitute for
the ki, and though no ritual is attached, he is being served by the
elders. This too, one can easily see, in no way conflicts with the
service of God, nor does it compete. But it is not Western, and we
find it hard to understand.

Now I suspect that Rev. Smith in no way desired this sort of thing,
but given the system, it is inevitable. Yet it poses great problems,
because the church must always be meeting today's problems with the
word of God as she sees it today, and can not be tied to any one voice
other than that of the Holy Spirit. But the problem is essentially the
mission's to solve, through patience and respect and understanding. Any
pushing on our part is foolish unless it is done with the whole system
in mind. And how are we to learn the system when there is so little
interest in studying it on the part of the mission?

area

A third area is much more important. If the church truly
wants to do away with ki in all forms, it must answer the questions
regarding the position of the dead today and how the Christian must
relate to them. In our Western Christianity few would be able to
sympathize with the notions of talking to the dead, but I suspect the
church must study this. Many questions arise: If I maintain a close
relationship with my father after he dies, when I become a Christian
can it be that he does too? Locked as we are in our individualism,
the question is impossible, but the Wapan see in terms of families and
households, much like the early Jews, and the question could have real
meaning and impact if properly studied by the church. Can I pray to
my grandfathers to tell them what I have experienced about Christ?
A silly question? Only insofar as we don't comprehend the people we
are working among. The Bible insists that all men have life after
death; it tells of visits between the living and the dead; it insists
that the God of Abraham is a God of a man who is alive, and not dead.
The Jews realised little of this at first, and Christ came to purify
their understanding. The Wapan realise much of this, perhaps more than
we can, and it is still up to Christ to purify their understanding too.

What then is the message of Christianity to the Wapan? Certainly that God is not as far off as they have thought. Certainly that Christ is God among men, making us all brothers reconciled through himself. Certainly that the dead elders are not the proper way to approach God. Probably also that Christ came into history for those dead elders too, and that as the ancient Abraham found his place in Christ, so too the dead who long ago sought God along the Wapan road may find their place as the children of elder Abraham.

One final comment: Schools are being built to maintain a Reformed Witness in Nigeria. There is nothing wrong with that, if it means an emphasis on the study and preaching of the Word. But if it means less sympathy for the various tribes and an attempt to saddle any one of them with more trappings of our Western religious and secular heritage, and if it means that we as missionaries continue to be the teachers and will never first become the learners, I fear no good can come of it except what the Holy Spirit salvages. Christ became a Jew to offer the Jews the directest way to the Father. Perhaps the meaning of that is that He can become a Wapan or a Tiv to offer that same di-

rect way to those tribes. He did not come to destroy the law and prophets, but to fulfill them. Could it be the same for the tribes of Africa?

A month or two ago some elders, non-Christian, asked me if I knew the meaning of my Wapan name. (Amatakitswen, God loves the world) The name had been given me by the church in conjunction with the Chief of Wukari. When I pressed them for an explanation of the name, they went into a long dissertation of the love of God as seen in the growth of the grain. They were "pagans" quoting without ever having seen it, the portion of Scripture found in Mark 4:26-29. They were doing this with their own God-given insight, and they got the content of the passage remarkably accurate. Meanwhile the Christians in the same village, some with a few years of Bible School in Hausa, are floundering and struggling, trying to make sense of the meaning of salvation through Christ and its implications. How do we help them? And how do we show the traditional religionist that there is new meaning and new life to be had if Christ is allowed to purify completely the Wapan way of life? Only if we ourselves attempt with far greater energy than in the past, to learn and understand the ways that are so new to us. At present we are trying to have the elder's stomach ache without ever having been the child who served the elder.

Bill Evenhouse

Note to Evangelism Department: I intended to write another section too, in which I pointed out that, though we are in an age of indigenoussness, the mission still exists in somewhat the elder's position in the scheme of thing-as-they-are, and that that should make us seriously consider encouraging the church to rethink its positions on polygamy (which I consider a grave mistake and not scriptural) and beer-drinking (again a cause of great hypocrisy in the church here, and one could write a separate essay on why this should be expected). I also wanted to write on why I believe we as a mission should be aiding the church in certain financial areas which at present we wish to avoid. But enough is enough, and perhaps if I cease at this point, one or two among us would consent to read a forthcoming paper, if it is not too long.

P.S. I should mention that anyone who reads The Primal Vision by John Taylor, will see that I learned some things from it. Because this has been done in haste, and because I never took notes on the book, I was unable to quote from it. But herewith I attempt to give credit where it is due, and to beg those of us interested in Africa to read the book.

B.E.