

West African Proverbs

Human figures:

Man scraping bark from a tree:

When a man goes alone to scrap bark from a tree, it falls to the ground. (Do not refuse help when you need it.)

Man holding neck of a snake:

If you hold a snake by the head what is left is only a string. (If you catch the leader of your enemy his followers will be helpless.)

Man holding his stomach:

One should not bear one's stomach a grudge.

(Said of someone who, however unpleasant, is essential to you; since you have no choice you must put up with him.)

Man holding egg:

A man's honor is like an egg; if he does not hold it properly it falls and breaks.

Man blowing horn:

If a man is lost, the sound of his state horn

will help him to be found. (A man is protected by his own people.)

Man carrying a basket with another looking in:

I am carrying an empty basket, why do you look in? (If someone is in trouble you should not try to rub it in with curiosity.)

Animals, reptiles, fish:

Elephant:

One who follows the track of the elephant never gets wet from the dew on the bushes.
(Follow an important man and he will protect you in time of trouble.)

Hippopotamus:

A hippopotamus can be made invisible in water.
(Ignorance can lead to potential danger. It is important to be informed and alert.)

Antelope:

Not all the forest hates the antelope.
(You should encourage someone after a dispute, to encourage him to persevere.)

Leopard:

When the rain falls on the leopard it wets the spots on his skin but does not wash them off. *(A person's nature is not changed by circumstances.)*

Ram's Head:

If the ram is fond of butting, its courage comes from the heart and not from the horns. *(Strength is nothing without courage.)*

Tortoise:

Tortoise you are suffering in your shell.
(However secure a person seems, he has hidden troubles.)

Animals, reptiles, fish continued:

Crocodile:

The old crocodile swallows a pebble when the year ends. (Misfortunes come each year; we must accept them as part of life.)

Two crocodiles joined in the middle:

Crocodiles share one stomach, yet when they get their food they fight over it. (Relatives should not quarrel for all belong to one family and depend on it for their well-being.)

Rats:

Rats don't dance in the cat's doorway. (Don't invite trouble.)

Snake:

The cobra that blocks the path is going his own way, yet people run away when they see him. (Once you get a bad reputation, nobody will trust you even when you intend no harm.)

Frog:

The length of a frog is known only after it's death.

(A person's worth is not appreciated in his lifetime.)

Fish:

If the fish comes out of the water to say that the crocodile is ill, no one should doubt it. (Nobody will doubt what a close friend says about you.)

Animals, reptiles, fish continued:

Land Snail:

When a child goes to the bush, it should look for snails and not for the tortoise. (It takes much experience to find a tortoise in the bush, but snails are common and any child can find them. Only do what is within your power or you may achieve nothing.)

Anyinaboa beetle:

Anyinaboa, the fire will eventually reach you (when the tree in which you hide is burnt down). (The consequences of your bad deed will one day catch up with you.)

Birds:

Sankofa bird looking backwards:

When it lies behind you, take it. (Use the wisdom of the past.)

The Hornbill bird and the snake:

The snake on the ground has caught the bird in the sky. (You should not despair of getting anything, however difficult it may seem.)

Birds in a nest:

A bird's relative is the one with whom it shares a nest. (Common problems bring together those that are affected by them.)