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Echoes of African Wisdom

A collection of 50 sayings and proverbs



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Illustrated reflections

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For my mother.

She did not learn wisdom from books,
yet she carried a library within her voice.

Through stories and proverbs,
she planted the seeds that grew into these pages.

Note to the Reader

I grew up listening to my mother share stories, sayings and proverbs. I did not always understand them then. Some only began to make sense years later, through my own experiences. Many still speak to me today.

This second collection draws from Mandinka and wider Manding traditions, other parts of Africa and the work of African writers. A proverb may carry different meanings from one place to another. Some of the English wording has been translated or retold.

Each illustration offers one reading. The reflection below it turns towards ordinary life, where the same question or tension may appear differently. You may find another meaning. That is part of what keeps these sayings alive.

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CHAPTER

01

What the first glance misses

Rain can hide a worker’s sweat. Soil can hide the stone that breaks an axe. The first glance is often incomplete. Here, a little more attention changes what we think we know.

SAYINGS 01 TO 10

1

Beware of the naked man who offers you clothes.



Empty promises.

Mandinka, West Africa

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Promises and means

An offer of help arrives before anyone has checked what is available to give. It is welcome because it answers a real need. Only later does someone ask whether there is time, money or authority behind the promise.

Some offers are made with sincere intentions. Others cost little because they will never be tested. The difference becomes clearer when help is needed. Generosity may begin with knowing what we can actually give.

2

No one notices the sweat of someone sweating in the rain.



Invisible effort

Mandinka, West Africa

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The work no one sees

Two people finish a difficult week. One has a crowded diary that everyone can see. The other has quietly cleared problems that never reached the agenda. From the outside, their effort looks very different.

We often recognise work through visible signs of strain. Quiet effort is harder to count, particularly when someone makes difficult tasks look ordinary. A person can carry a heavy share of the load without appearing burdened.

3

When your goat goes missing, even your neighbour's soup becomes suspicious.



Suspicion and fear

Mandinka, West Africa

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When doubt takes over

A message goes unanswered. When trust is already weak, the delay can quickly acquire a meaning that nobody intended. One person imagines exclusion; another is simply busy with something else.

Small details begin to look like proof when we are afraid of what they might mean. Suspicion fills the space where facts have not yet arrived. By the time an explanation comes, a whole story may already be in place.

4

A hidden stone can blunt the sharpest axe.



Unseen obstacles

Mandinka, West Africa

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What was overlooked

A team prepares well and still finds itself unable to move. People question the plan, the effort or the ability of those doing the work. The missing piece may be a rule or concern nobody noticed at the start.

When progress slows, asking people to work harder may leave the obstacle untouched. An unspoken worry or a small gap in information can undo careful preparation. The difficulty deserves attention before the people carrying it are judged.

5

Nothing beneath the hair escapes the louse.



Inside knowledge

Mandinka, West Africa

Visual created with the assistance of AI.

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Close to the ground

A visitor spends a morning in an organisation and leaves with a neat account of how it works. Staff who use its systems every day know where the delays begin and which workarounds have become routine.

Distance offers one view; closeness offers another. Daily experience does not make a person right about everything. It does give them knowledge that a brief visit cannot provide. That knowledge is easily missed when titles speak louder than experience.

6

Beautiful salt water is still unfit to drink.



Appearance and usefulness

Mandinka, West Africa

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The test of usefulness

A proposal arrives with a polished design and confident language. It is easy to admire before asking how someone would actually use it. The question is simple, but it can change the whole conversation.

Appearance can draw attention to an idea. Its usefulness becomes clear when it meets a real need. A service that looks excellent on paper may still leave the people it is meant for without what they came to find.

7

The pot calls the kettle black, but both are made of clay.



Hypocrisy and self-blindness

Mandinka, West Africa

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The same fault, twice

During a review, one colleague criticises slow replies while leaving several messages unanswered. The concern may be real. So is the awkward resemblance between the behaviour being judged and the behaviour of the person judging it.

We recognise other people’s weaknesses more readily than our own. A little self-recognition can make criticism fairer. It does not erase the problem. It changes the certainty with which we speak about it.

8

A toad does not run in daylight without reason.



Reading unusual behaviour

Mandinka, West Africa

Visual created with the assistance of AI.

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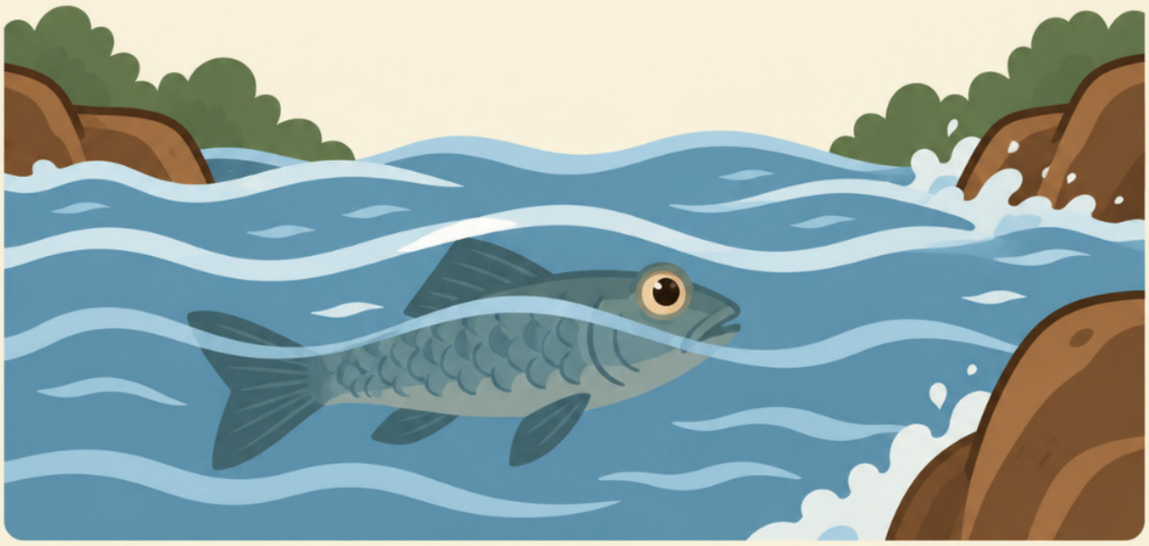
Before we judge a reaction

Someone who normally speaks freely becomes quiet in a meeting. Others notice the change and begin to interpret it. They may call it disinterest, disagreement or a lack of confidence before anyone has asked what happened.

An unusual reaction is sometimes the only visible sign that something has changed. Quick judgement can hide the reason beneath it. Curiosity leaves more room for the person to explain what others cannot see.

9

No river rises high enough to cover the eyes of a fish.



Perspective under pressure

Wole Soyinka, Death and the King’s Horseman

Visual created with the assistance of AI.

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One point of reference

In a demanding week, every request can begin to look urgent. A short delay feels like failure, and the next problem fills all the available space. It becomes hard to see beyond what is immediately in front of us.

Pressure narrows attention. One steady point of reference can help us recover a little perspective: what has changed, what remains true and what can wait. The pressure does not disappear. Our view of it may become clearer.

10

Only the person carrying a needle in their clothes knows its discomfort.



Invisible suffering

Luba, DR Congo

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Room for what we cannot see

A colleague arrives at work, completes their tasks and speaks calmly through a difficult discussion. Nothing in that morning reveals what they may be carrying beyond the room.

We make sense of people through the small part of their lives we can see. A composed face may sit alongside worry or pain. We do not need access to every private difficulty to leave room for the possibility that one exists.

CHAPTER

02

Power and its limits

A place at the front attracts attention. Trust asks for more. A leader may protect, silence or take advantage of those who follow. Power becomes clearer when we look at its effect on others.

SAYINGS 11 TO 20

11

Even a goat can bite when conditions become unbearable.



Limits of endurance

Mandinka, West Africa

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When patience runs out

A person accepts extra work again and again. Each request seems manageable on its own. Over time, the requests become an expectation, until one day the person refuses and everyone is surprised.

Patience is easily mistaken for unlimited consent. When the refusal finally arrives, attention falls on the reaction. The many quiet decisions that made it necessary can disappear from the account.

12

When the hyena leads the goats in prayer, none may survive the service.



Predatory leadership

Mandinka, West Africa

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Whose interests are served?

A leader speaks warmly about care and trust. The words are reassuring. People still watch what happens when a hard choice is made, especially when protecting someone has a cost.

Authority is easier to describe than to judge. The effect of a decision gives a clearer account of whose interests matter. A leader’s intentions may be hidden, but the people who bear the consequences are not.

13

When a new cock enters the yard, the old cock challenges it.



Resistance to succession

Mandinka, Djibril Tamsir Niane, Sunjata

Visual created with the assistance of AI.

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The arrival of someone new

A new colleague questions a routine that has been in place for years. The question sounds practical, yet it can feel personal to those who helped build the system and are known for running it.

Change can unsettle more than a procedure. It can threaten a familiar role or the respect attached to it. The newcomer may be asking about the work, while the old guard hears a question about its place.

14

Even the mighty silk-cotton tree must reckon with the climbing creeper.



Unexpected strength

Mandinka, Djibril Tamsir Niane, Sunjata

Visual created with the assistance of AI.

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What size cannot tell us

A junior colleague notices a problem that senior people have passed over. Their contribution is small in title, though it may be large in effect. At first, the room gives it little attention.

Influence is not always measured by rank or resources. A quiet voice can alter a decision once it is heard. The difficulty is that small contributions are often judged before their effect is known.

15

Words can reach a king where iron cannot.



The power of speech

Mandinka, Djibril Tamsir Niane, Sunjata

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When words open doors

A difficult decision remains closed through several formal exchanges. A careful conversation may reach the people involved in a different way, especially when it names the concern without turning it into a contest.

Words can open a path that pressure closes. Their force depends on timing, care and the willingness to listen. What we say often matters as much as the position from which we speak.

16

Looking at a king’s mouth, one might forget he once suckled at his mother’s breast.



Power and humble origins

Chinua Achebe, Things Fall Apart

Visual created with the assistance of AI.

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Remembering where we began

A new title changes how people address someone. Meetings become more formal, questions less direct, and ordinary mistakes harder to mention. The person may begin to believe that the distance is part of the role.

Authority can make humble beginnings easy to forget. Everyone who leads has needed help, care and patience. Remembering this does not weaken a role. It can change how the person holding it treats others.

17

The cockroach can sing and dance, but the hen prevents it from performing in daylight.



Talent denied opportunity

Edo, Nigeria

Visual created with the assistance of AI.

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Who stays outside?

A capable colleague has ideas, experience and the energy to contribute. Yet the invitation to join the discussion never arrives. Their work remains unseen because the opportunity to show it is controlled elsewhere.

Talent does not always reach the place where decisions are made. Access matters. When judging what a person has achieved, we also need to notice who opens the door and who is left waiting outside.

18

Until the lion has its own storyteller, the hunter will have the best story.



Power over narratives

Ewe-Mina, West Africa

Visual created with the assistance of AI.

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Who gets to tell it?

After a difficult event, the first account is often the one that travels. A report is drafted, a meeting ends and a conclusion begins to settle before everyone affected has spoken.

The same event can be understood differently from another place in the story. A fuller account needs more than the voice that speaks first or loudest. Those who carry the consequences deserve room to describe them.

19

When the fool becomes wise, the cunning person faces trouble.



Knowledge changes power

Pare, Tanzania

Visual created with the assistance of AI.

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What knowledge changes

A process is understood by only a few people. Everyone else must ask for help each time a decision is needed. The arrangement may seem efficient to those who hold the knowledge.

Information can keep people dependent when it stays in a small circle. Sharing it changes who can question a decision and who can act without permission. Knowledge alters relationships as well as tasks.

20

A leader’s heart is like a groundnut pod that hides many things.



Hidden intentions

Lega, DR Congo

Visual created with the assistance of AI.

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What actions reveal

A leader’s public words tell one story; everyday decisions may tell another. People try to read intentions from speeches, silences and gestures. The uncertainty can invite more guessing than evidence.

We cannot see into another person’s mind. Over time, their actions offer a better guide than suspicion. The choices they make when nobody is applauding reveal what their promises leave unclear.

CHAPTER

03

What we owe one another

A full pot is easier to carry with two hands. Care, generosity and respect are found in small gestures. So are their limits. What we give and what we owe often meet in the same moment.

SAYINGS 21 TO 30

21

A lizard may drink from a cow's trough, but the cow will never lack water.



Sharing without loss

Mandinka, West Africa

Visual created with the assistance of AI.

PositiveMinds | adamacoulibaly.com

Sharing without losing

A colleague asks to use a room, a tool or a contact that another person has relied on for years. The request may feel like a loss before anyone has looked at what is actually being shared.

Sharing is sometimes treated as though another person's gain must reduce our own place. Often the cost is smaller than the fear around it. A useful introduction can help someone else without closing a door for us.

22

If your cow gives you milk, do not let it suffer thirst.



Caring for the source

Mandinka, West Africa

Visual created with the assistance of AI.

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Caring for those who give

A team depends on one person who always makes time for others. Their help becomes so familiar that nobody notices the long days or postponed needs behind it.

We sometimes expect care to continue without asking what sustains the person giving it. Gratitude means little when the source of that care is quietly running out of strength. What we depend on also needs attention.

23

A single twig isn’t enough to sweep the courtyard.



Collective effort

Mandinka, West Africa

Visual created with the assistance of AI.

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Each hand has a part

At the end of a shared task, people remember different parts of the work. One person arranged the space. Another brought what was needed. Others stayed to finish what remained.

Working together does not mean making identical contributions. It means understanding how the pieces depend on one another. A group can be stronger when each person’s part is recognised, including the parts that attract little attention.

24

The river does not drink its own water.



Generosity and service

Mandinka, West Africa

Visual created with the assistance of AI.

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Giving without return

Someone takes time to help a newcomer understand a task. The benefit may appear much later, in another team or a place the person offering help will never visit.

Useful acts do not always return a direct reward. Some of the care we receive has travelled through many hands before reaching us. The value of giving cannot always be measured by what comes back.

25

Coming to the kitchen for embers gives you no right to open the cooking pot.



Respecting boundaries

Mandinka, West Africa

Visual created with the assistance of AI.

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Help has boundaries

A neighbour lends a key so someone can collect a forgotten item. The offer solves one problem. It does not open every room in the house or turn a temporary favour into a permanent right.

Care and boundaries can exist together. Help loses some of its warmth when it becomes a reason to ask for more than was offered. Respect can be shown in what we choose not to take.

26

Invite the hungry person to eat before telling them to wash their hands.



Care before ceremony

Mandinka, West Africa

Visual created with the assistance of AI.

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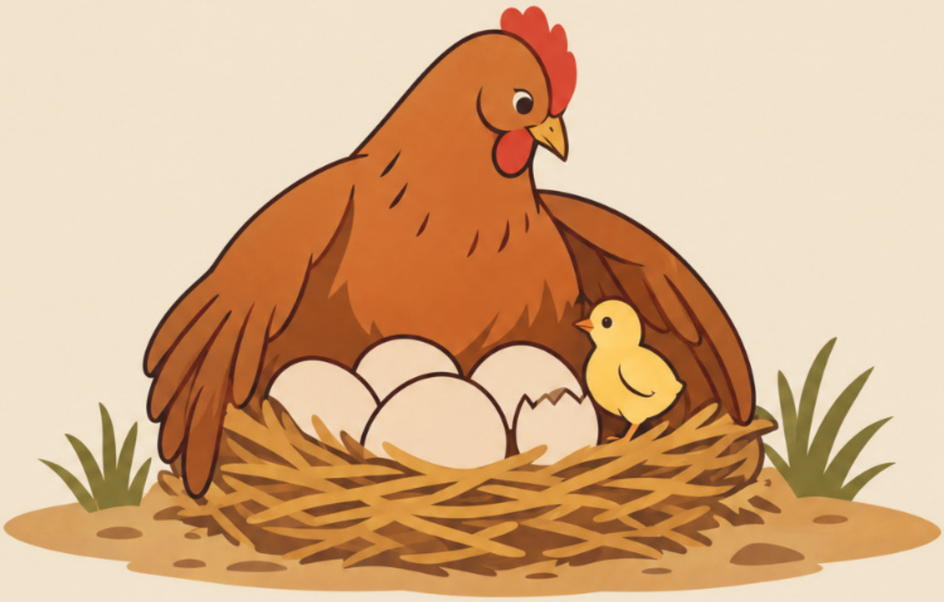
The need in front of us

A visitor arrives tired and hungry. The host has a familiar routine for welcoming people, but the need in front of them is more immediate than the order in which things are usually done.

Rules often have a purpose. They can also become an obstacle when they are treated as more important than the person they were meant to serve. Care begins with noticing what cannot wait.

27

The hen that hatches the eggs must sit on them.



Responsibility and follow-through

Mandinka, West Africa

Visual created with the assistance of AI.

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Staying with the work

A project receives attention on the day it begins. There are plans, photographs and promises. Months later, when routine tasks need doing, fewer people are watching.

Starting something is often easier to celebrate than staying with it. Responsibility continues after the first public moment. The quiet work of keeping a commitment alive is where much of its value is tested.

28

Whoever sends a child to catch a shrew must provide water to wash their hands.



Responsibility when delegating

Chinua Achebe, Arrow of God

Visual created with the assistance of AI.

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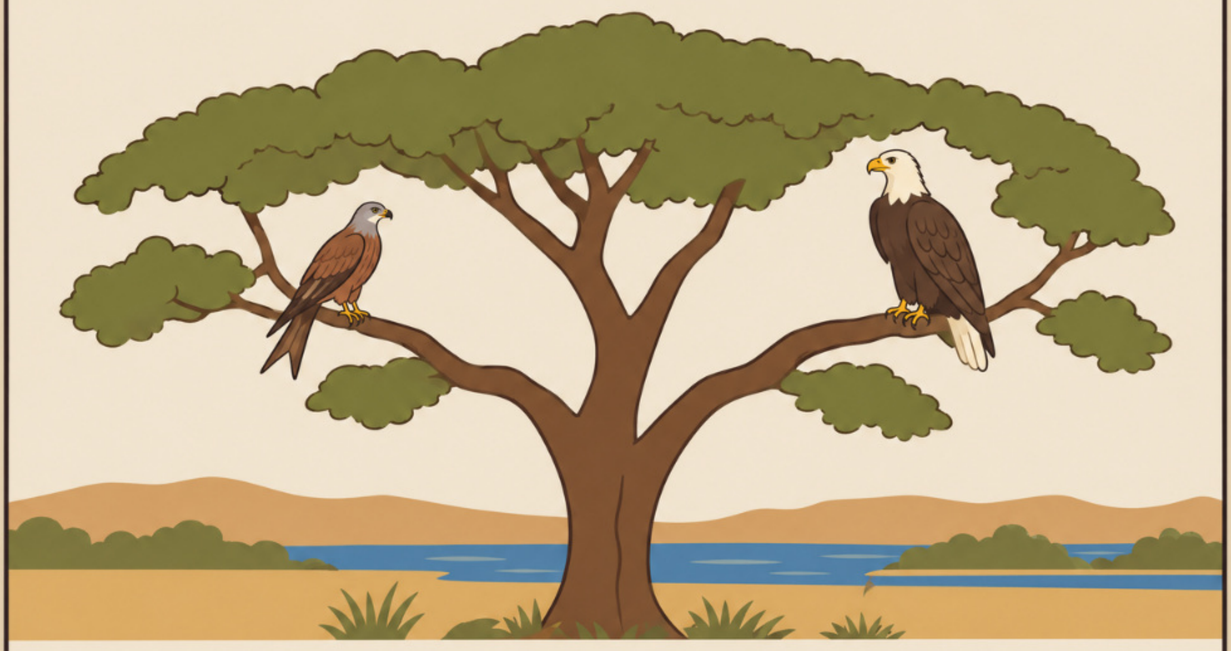
Responsibility follows the task

A manager assigns a difficult field task and expects it to be completed safely. The instructions may be clear, yet the person carrying them out still needs time, equipment and a way to deal with the risks.

Delegation does not end with a request. The person who gives the task also has a part in making it possible. Responsibility becomes hollow when the work moves downwards while the means to do it remain elsewhere.

29

Let the kite perch and the eagle perch too.



Coexistence

Igbo, Nigeria

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Space for another

Two colleagues both want space to speak. Each worries that attention given to the other will leave less room for their own work. The discussion becomes a contest before either idea has been heard.

Sharing a place does not always mean giving up one’s own. Someone else can belong without reducing our right to be there. It is harder to see this when recognition feels scarce.

30

When two people neglect a water pot, it may fall and break.



Shared responsibility without ownership

Akan, Ghana

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When everybody assumes

Two people notice a task that needs doing. Each assumes the other has it in hand, so neither asks. The omission stays quiet until something goes wrong.

Shared work can become nobody’s work when responsibility is left unnamed. Goodwill is not always enough to protect what matters. Sometimes a simple conversation about who will act prevents the problem that later attracts all the attention.

CHAPTER

04

When circumstances change

The wind turns. A familiar approach stops working. The difference may be small at first, then impossible to ignore. A little attention can help us recognise when a different response is needed.

SAYINGS 31 TO 40

31

When the donkey dies, the farting stops.



Causes and symptoms

Mandinka, West Africa

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What lies beneath the noise

The same complaint appears at a weekly meeting. People find quicker ways to answer it, and the discussion moves on. Yet the conditions that keep producing the complaint are left as they were.

Managing a symptom can make a day easier without changing the problem. When the noise returns, the underlying cause deserves another look. Treating it may take more courage than dealing with each new interruption.

32

The chameleon takes the colour of the plant it holds.



Influence of surroundings

Mandinka, West Africa

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The habits around us

A new member of a team soon learns which questions are welcomed and which are met with silence. Their behaviour begins to change, sometimes before they notice it themselves.

People adapt to the places in which they work and live. The habits around them shape what feels safe to say and do. When a culture produces the same behaviour again and again, the conditions are worth examining.

33

The frog loves water, but not when it is hot.



Limits of tolerance

Mandinka, West Africa

Visual created with the assistance of AI.

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A limit is still a limit

A person who cares deeply about their work keeps agreeing to extra requests. Others take this willingness as proof that the demands are manageable. The person may feel less able to say when enough is enough.

Commitment is easily confused with endless tolerance. Loving a place or a task does not mean every condition is acceptable. A limit can be real even when the commitment remains.

34

Before clearing the field with an axe, try the hoe.



Choosing the right response

Mandinka, West Africa

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The right tool first

A small disagreement draws calls for a formal investigation before the people involved have had a useful conversation. Strong action can look decisive, especially when others are watching.

The right response depends on the problem, not on how much authority is available. A lighter tool may leave more room for understanding and repair. Force used too soon can make a manageable problem harder to resolve.

35

A house built on old foundations may last longer.



Learning from what came before

Mandinka, West Africa

Visual created with the assistance of AI.

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What earlier work can teach

A new team inherits an old process. Some parts are clumsy, while others solve problems that newcomers have not yet met. Replacing everything may be quicker than understanding why it was built that way.

Experience can leave useful support beneath work that looks out of date. Keeping what still works is different from refusing to change. The question is what the earlier work can teach before we build again.

36

A lizard cannot enter a mud house without cracks.



Weakness from within

Mandinka, West Africa

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The gap within

A small error spreads through a system that people thought was secure. Attention turns immediately to the last person involved. The weakness may have been waiting there long before that moment.

When something goes wrong, blaming the point of entry can hide a gap within the organisation. A missing check or an ignored warning may have made the failure possible. Repair starts when the gap is seen.

37

The river that is patient carves the rock.



Quiet persistence

Mandinka, West Africa

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The slow work

A team looks for progress at the end of a week and finds little to show. The work has been careful, but its effects are too small to attract notice. Doubt enters before the effort has had time to settle.

Some changes do not arrive through a single decisive moment. Repeated attention can make a difference that becomes clear only later. A short view can miss the slow work already under way.

38

A kapok leaf is too large for a young goat's mouth.



Knowing your limits

Mandinka, West Africa

Visual created with the assistance of AI.

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Before taking on more

A new opportunity is offered to someone who wants to grow. It brings welcome recognition, but also demands more time and experience than they have had the chance to develop.

Readiness is not the same as ambition. Accepting a task without the support to carry it can leave both the person and the work exposed. Sometimes the wiser choice is to ask what is needed before agreeing.

39

When hunters learn to shoot without missing, the bird learns to fly without perching.



Adapting to changed conditions

Chinua Achebe, Things Fall Apart

Visual created with the assistance of AI.

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When the routine no longer works

A routine that worked well for years begins to produce poor results. The team keeps following it because it once served them, even as the conditions around it change.

Past success can make a familiar method hard to question. A different response becomes possible when we notice what has changed. The task may be the same, but the surroundings no longer are.

40

The day of the hunt is too late to train the hunting dog.



Preparation

Amadou Hampâté Bâ, L’étrange destin de Wangrin

Visual created with the assistance of AI.

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Practice before the test

A new procedure is explained only when a difficult incident begins. People are expected to remember unfamiliar steps while also dealing with the pressure of the moment.

Preparation rarely attracts much attention when things are calm. Practice needs time, and that time cannot be borrowed from an emergency. The work done beforehand becomes visible when it is needed.

CHAPTER

05

Choices and their consequences

A pebble falls into still water. Its ripples travel farther than the hand that dropped it. Choices work much the same way. Their effects may appear at once or become visible long after.

SAYINGS 41 TO 50

41

Do not release the fish in your hand for another beneath your foot.



Certainty and temptation

Mandinka, West Africa

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What we already hold

An attractive new offer appears while someone already holds a useful commitment. The new possibility receives more attention because its benefits are still imagined. What is already there begins to look ordinary.

Temptation can change how we value certainty. Reaching for something else may be right, but the cost of letting go deserves a clear look. Possibility alone does not tell us what we stand to lose.

42

The fly without advice follows the corpse into the grave.



The danger of following blindly

Chinua Achebe, Arrow of God

Visual created with the assistance of AI.

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The right to ask

A group agrees quickly on a plan. One member has doubts, but everyone else seems comfortable. Asking a question begins to feel harder than following along.

Belonging can save us from having to decide every small thing alone. It can also make us surrender judgement when it matters. Trust leaves room for the question nobody else has asked.

43

The hyena, wanting to eat its young, declares that it smells like a goat.



Excuses for wrongdoing

Birago Diop, Les Contes d'Amadou Koumba

Visual created with the assistance of AI.

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A reason found afterwards

A decision is made privately. When it becomes public, the explanation is carefully arranged to make the choice appear necessary. The account tells us little about what came first.

People can become skilled at finding reasons for what they already want to do. The order matters. An explanation deserves more attention when it mainly protects the person offering it.

44

One stone from home is worth ten from the riverbed.



Overlooked value

Southern Tashelhayt, North Africa

Visual created with the assistance of AI.

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What is close at hand

A team begins searching outside for advice before speaking to people who have worked with the problem for years. The outside view may help, but the first conversation has been missed.

We can overlook the knowledge close to us because it feels too familiar to count. Someone nearby may remember the last difficulty and know why a rule exists. Distance alone does not make an answer better.

45

An arrow that has not entered deeply is easier to remove.



Dealing with problems early

Buli, Ghana

Visual created with the assistance of AI.

PositiveMinds | adamacoulibaly.com

Repair while it is small

A small misunderstanding appears in a team. Nobody wants to disturb the peace, so the conversation is postponed. Over time, the silence gives the disagreement more room to grow.

Some problems are easier to address while they are still small. Waiting can add hurt and certainty to what began as confusion. Early repair may be uncomfortable, but delay rarely makes the work lighter.



The person who carries

A person volunteers to carry supplies for a group. Something breaks on the way. The mistake is visible; the decision to help is easier to forget because it happened earlier.

People who take responsibility face risks that spectators do not. Accountability still matters, but judgement should consider the work attempted as well as the damage done. Doing nothing can look safer from a distance.

47

Other fishing baskets in the water cannot prevent you from placing yours.



Making room for others

Mandinka, West Africa

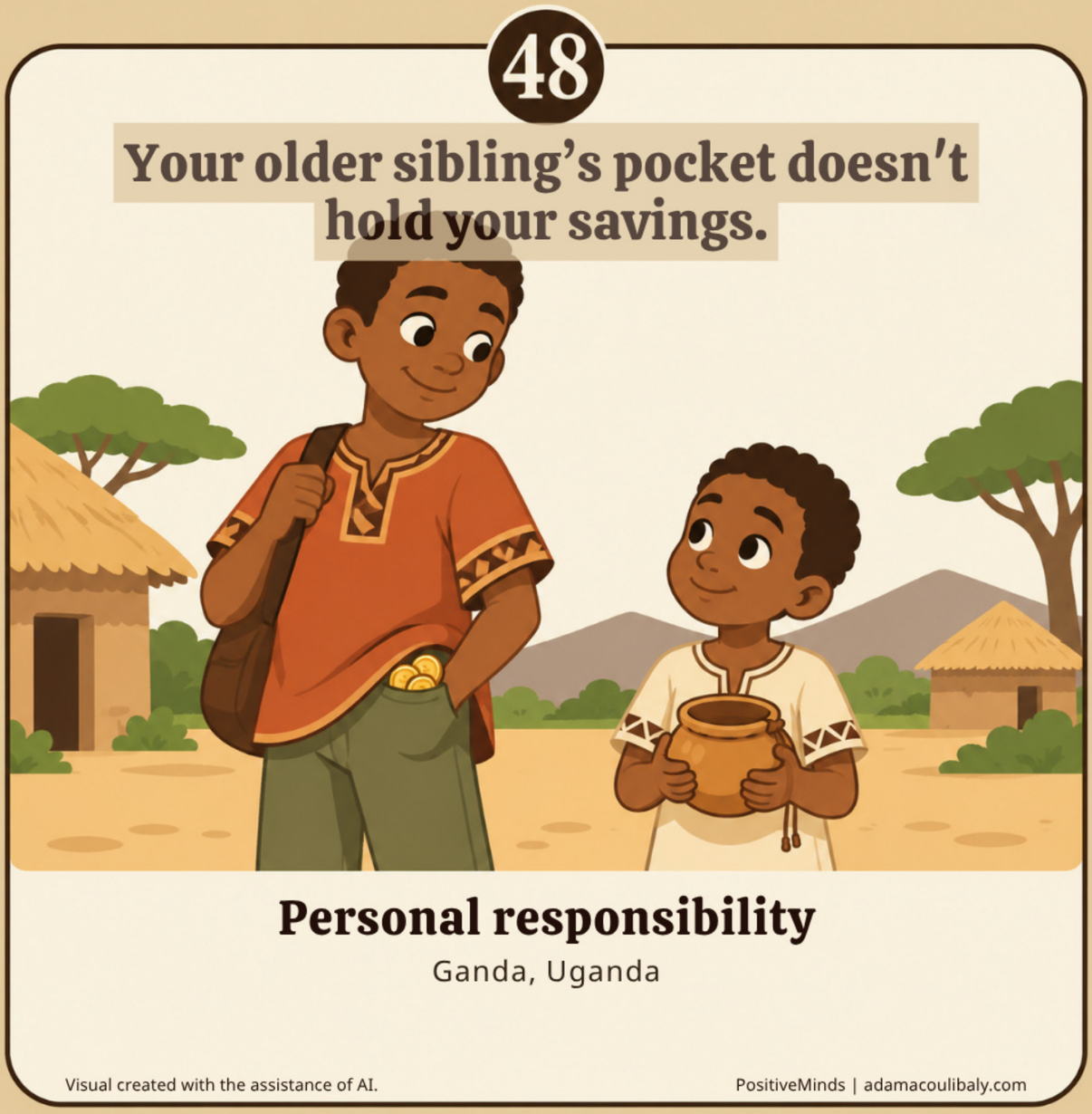
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There is still room

A newcomer sees that others are already doing the work they hope to do. It is tempting to conclude that every useful place has been taken before they have even started.

The presence of others does not always mean there is no room. Different people bring different approaches and meet different needs. Someone else’s work need not prevent us from offering our own.



What belongs to us

A younger member of a family assumes an older relative will cover an unexpected cost. The support may be offered with love, but relying on it without asking creates an expectation neither person has agreed to.

Help can make a difference, and receiving it is no failure. Dependence becomes fragile when we mistake someone else's security for our own. What we build for ourselves still matters.

49

When a leaf falls, the tree receives the blame.



Collective reputation

Chewa/Nyanja, Southern Africa

Visual created with the assistance of AI.

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One act, many names

One person acts carelessly, and the whole team is asked to explain. People who had no part in the decision find that others now look at their work with suspicion.

Reputation is shared more easily than responsibility. A group can be judged through one member’s actions, fairly or unfairly. Care for a common name begins with noticing how far a single act can travel.

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Whoever tells you stories about others will tell others stories about you.



Gossip and trust

Tugen, Kenya

Visual created with the assistance of AI.

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Stories that travel

A visitor speaks freely about people who are not present. The story is interesting, and listening feels harmless. Yet the ease with which it is told offers a clue about how private conversations may be treated.

Gossip often asks for trust while quietly weakening it. The person who carries someone else’s story may one day carry ours through another door. What we choose to hear can matter as much as what we repeat.

On the images and design

The sayings in these pages come from oral traditions, recorded collections and African literary works. I selected and interpreted them for this collection.

I developed the visual ideas, then used AI image-generation tools to help create the illustrations. Each image was reviewed and adjusted to bring its scene closer to the saying. The small acknowledgement on each card makes that use of AI visible.

Canva was used to help prepare the visual collection. These tools support the design process. They do not replace the people and traditions that have carried the sayings forward.

THANK YOU

Let’s keep the conversation going.



Adama Coulibaly

Writer | Development practitioner | Visual thinker

Thank you for spending time with these sayings and proverbs. I hope they stay with you in conversation, at work or at home. Their meaning continues in the way we use them.

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