

## A Closer Look At Jamaican Proverbs

Proverbs can be defined as short excerpts from stories about life's lessons. Replete as they are with cultural symbolism, proverbs convey important ideas about human nature, health and social relations that often transcend their culture of origin, even though occasionally to fully understand their meaning some grounding in that culture is helpful.

Proverbs are timeless, succinct, clever, often funny and usually memorable. Although they can poke fun many express a desire for tolerance and respect. Many also express similar ideas, reflecting the idea that there is often more than one way to say any one thing. Many, like folk tales and fables, also use animals to depict human behaviour, thereby allowing, as does the practice of wearing masks in jonkunno or carnival, a wider means of identification and expression by removing any fear of recognition. In slavery, of course, this idea of coded personal expressions took on even greater importance.

### A GENERAL HISTORY OF PROVERBS

The purpose of most proverbs is to teach about survival. They are created in several different ways: some are simple platitudes which, because they seem to have universal application, become commonly regarded as small bits of wisdom. Some are derived from actual tales or fables, others from the Bible or literary texts such as Shakespearean plays. Usually, however, it is the act of repetition that elevates an assertion to proverbial status. In Jamaica, proverbs stand as examples of creolization - "a cultural action, material, psychological or spiritual based upon the stimulus response of individuals to their environment and as white/black, culturally discrete groups to each other" (Braithwaite, 1971, p, 26). Our proverbs reflect African and European influences and are uniquely Jamaican. As in many cultures, the ability to understand proverbs rests on the level of familiarity one has with a particular culture. Today, perceptions abound that Jamaican children's self-awareness, their sense of pride, is being eroded due to exposure to American television, music and merchandise. As a result, Jamaican academics and policymakers repeatedly cite the island as in a state of cultural chaos. Cultural systems, they warn, are under threat not only by foreign influences but from lack of recognition by Jamaicans themselves. To that end, the following proverbs, a short list of 20 taken from lists of hundreds, some common, others not so common, are presented here to challenge readers of all ages to see how in touch they are with what has been called one of the strongest roots of Jamaican culture. After you make your guesses, take some time to reflect on the wit and wisdom contained in these short statements. Sources: Braithwaite, E. (1971). *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica*. Oxford: Clarendon Press. Morris-Brown, V. (1993). *The Jamaica Handbook of Proverbs*. Jamaica Island Heart Publishers. QUIZ TIME! Can you complete these Jamaican proverbs? The following proverbs are written in a loose combination of standard English and patois - in an attempt to reflect the two languages commonly used on the island and out of a dual respect for the fact that this will be read rather than heard and the fact that proverbs themselves are bastions of the oral tradition, having survived orally for over hundreds of years. See if you can fill in the blanks.

1. "One, one coco \_\_\_\_ basket" (Do not expect to achieve success overnight).
2. "Every mikkle \_\_\_\_ a mukkle" (Every little bit counts).
3. "Wat doan \_\_\_\_, will fatten" (Do not waste time worrying over something that does you no real harm. You may even be able to turn it around into something positive).
4. "Chicken merry, \_\_\_\_ dah near" (Be vigilant as danger can be found in unexpected places).
5. "Every dawg has his day and every puss his \_\_\_\_ o'clock" and cock mouth \_\_\_\_ cock. (Do not act as if you are better than others, your day will come).
6. "Wanti, wanti, cyan getti, getti, getti nuh \_\_\_\_" Also "silent rivah run deep" and "No mug no bruk, no coffee nuh dash wey" (Count your blessings and do not take what you have for granted).
7. "Sorry fi mawga dog, mawga dog wi tun round and \_\_\_\_ you" (Sometimes it is those whom we help who are the least grateful).
8. "Duppy know \_\_\_\_ fi frighten" (Bullies know to pick on those least able to defend themselves).
9. "See mi a one thing, come lib with me \_\_\_\_" (To see me is one thing, to live with me, another or as in another popular saying, do not judge a book by its cover).
10. "De olda de clock, de \_\_\_\_ it wine" (The older a person is, the wiser).
11. "When coco ripe, it mus \_\_\_\_" (Actions speak louder than words).

12. "Hog say, 'de first dutty water mi \_\_\_\_\_, mi wash'." (Seize opportunities as they present themselves).
13. "One eye man king in \_\_\_\_\_ man country". (No matter how bad it seems things may be, there is always another for whom things are worse).
14. "Fool-fool pickney mek fowl \_\_\_\_\_ away from him two time" (Never allow yourself to be fooled the same way more than once).
15. "Nuh fatten cockroach fi \_\_\_\_\_" (Do not waste time doing things for which others will be ungrateful).
16. "Saltfish sit down pon di \_\_\_\_\_ a wait fi bread and butter" (Lazy people wait for life's blessings to come to them).
17. "Mi old, but mi nuh \_\_\_\_\_" (Do not underestimate the value of the elderly).
18. "Disobedient pickney \_\_\_\_\_ rockstone" (Disobedient children will come to a bad end).
19. "Dawg say if him have money him would buy him own \_\_\_\_\_" (Some people, when they wind up with money, will waste it in unnecessary things).
20. "Talk and \_\_\_\_\_ your tongue" (Think before you speak).

**ANSWERS:**

1. full. 2. mek. 3. kill. 4. hawk. 5. four. 6. wanti. 7. bite. 8. who. 9. another. 10. faster.  
11. bus 12. ketch 13. blind 14. get 15. fowl. 16. counter. 17. cold. 18. nyam. 19. fleas. 20. taste.