

PROVERBS

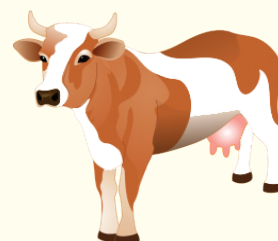
Meet Their Match

Proverbs are an important element in folk tradition... used in everyday conversation. They serve an educational and social function. Proverbs are used to teach, inspiring caution, courage and (common) sense. Many of Jamaica's proverbs show parallels with those of the two main sources from which they originate: the Asante culture of West Africa and the European (influences); however, many of our proverbs are purely Jamaican in origin, and reflect the innate wit and wisdom of the Jamaican people, as well as the colour and vitality (of any regional vernacular within Jamaican Patois itself). ^[1]

– OLIVE SENIOR

Every hoe have dem stick a' bush, and every proverb has its partner. The practical wisdom of traditional local sayings, as described in Olive Senior's quote above, is an endearing and integral part of Jamaican culture, and though the quote acknowledges parallels with non-Patois proverbs, each local proverb often has its like-minded local counterpart. The proverbs organically give well-heeded guidance, while reflecting and encouraging the people's resourcefulness and resilience. For avid collectors of clever colloquialisms, here are some proverbs with their meanings in English.

- 1.** **Nuh cuss alligator long mout till yu done cross de river.** ^[2] = **Han' inna lion mout, tek time draw it out.**
Hold your tongue; long-suffering discretion is the better part of valour.
- 2.** **One-one coco full basket. = Every mikkle mek a mukkule.**
Everything adds up; don't waste anything.
- 3.** **Donkey seh de world nuh level. = Puss an' dog nuh have de same luck.**
The world is unfair and often biased, but not impossible, if you take care.
- 4.** **So cow grow, so 'im nose hole open up. = Hog ask 'im muma, "Wha' mek yu mout soh long?" an' Muma tell 'im, "Aye, mi son, yu a grow come know."**
With experience comes wisdom; live and learn.
- 5.** **Wha' sweet to de belly a go bitta to de heart. = Wha' sweet nanny goat a go run 'im belly.**
Short-term gratification brings long-term consequences.
- 6.** **Tek 'kin teet' kibba heartbun. = Tek bad tings mek laugh.**
Smile or laugh to cover up disappointment or ease a heart-rending situation.
- 7.** **Empty yu purse inna yu head. = Nuh nyam yu name pon bulla; know 'A' from bullfoot.**
An investment in one's own education is the best way to go.
- 8.** **Dawg naw nuh suppa, him nyam cockroach. = When trouble tek yu, pickney shut fit yu.**
In times of trouble, practical people adapt in unlikely ways.
- 9.** **Beat Quaco, but gi' 'im 'im quattie. = Cuss dawg but nuh tell 'im 'bout 'im teet nuh white.**
Don't be biased; always give credit where credit is due.
- 10.** **Cow head can't too heavy fi carry cow horn. = A boasty an' fastness mek Anansi affi tan a house top.**
No one is above his or her God-given obligations, no matter how pompous one might be.



¹ P. 400, A-Z of Jamaican Heritage, Olive Senior, Heinemann Educational Books (Caribbean) Limited and The Gleaner, 1983

² P. 27, Jamaica Negro Proverbs and Sayings Collected and Classified According to Subjects, Izett Anderson and Frank Cundall, Institute of Jamaica Publishing, 1910/1927

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- 11.** New broom sweep clean; old broom know corna. = Old fyah stick easy fi ketch.
Never value newness over experience.
- 12.** Dawg wid too much ownna go a bed widout suppa. = Too much ratta never dig a good 'ole.
Where a task is assigned to too many persons, no one is likely to feel individually responsible for the job.
- 13.** When hog `ave money `im buy cheese. = Dog seh if `im `ave money `im woulda buy `im ownna flea.
When people don't know how to value their resources, they squander them.
- 14.** Yuh caan drown fish. = If yu bawn fi heng, yu caan drown.
A man can't be killed in any manner other than that in which he was destined to die. Also, you can't use a man's own vice to overwhelm him.
- 15.** Alligator nuh fi call hog long mout. = Finger never seh, "Look ya," it ongle seh, "Look deh."
People tend to point out other persons' flaws and ignore the same flaws within themselves.
- 16.** A nuh everyting good fi eat, good fi talk. = A nuh lack a tongue mek cow nuh labrish.
It's always best to be discreet; it's never good to gossip.
- 17.** Chair drop a grung, an' bench git up. = Bowl bruk, but gourdy come.
For each lost resource, practical persons recognise when its substitute invariably presents itself.
- 18.** Rockstone a river bottom nuh know sun hot. = Young bud nuh know storm.
Who feels it knows it, and experience teaches wisdom.
- 19.** Buy meat yu get bone; buy lan' yu get stone. = Even de bes' a field mus' `ave weed.
There is no perfect circumstance; everything has its drawbacks.
- 20.** A nuh same day leaf drop inna wata it rotten. = Every day bucket go a well, one day de battam mus' drop out.
Things can deteriorate gradually and imperceptibly; therefore, it is foolhardy to be complacent and take people or things for granted.

