

Title: *A Collection of Proverbs From the Kenya Media*

**Collected and compiled by: Joseph Kariuki
Privately published -- Nairobi, Kenya 2007**

Reviewed by: Angela Taiyana

**Nairobi, Kenya
May 4, 2007**

This compilation shows us how the “proverb” (or maxim, adage) is utilized by Kenyan citizens via the Kenyan media, and the most common feature of these proverbs is that they are being used to highlight the political atmosphere in the country.

Traditionally proverbs were widely used by elders to teach their juniors important lessons in life, and the basis behind this was the mere fact that a proverb was more enticing due to the challenge that came with deciphering it, as opposed to un-stimulating, straightforward statements.

For example, the very common Swahili proverb, “Asiyekubali kushindwa si mshindani” carries a lot of weight. Its direct meaning may not be considered to be very inspiring, for a surface translation could mean that defeat is one of the stepping stones to becoming a winner. “So why put effort in the first place?” could be an associate question. This might of course imply very shallow thinking, but it is quite justified in my opinion. If a young minded person translated this directly, this could be his/her summation of the statement.

But when you look into the deeper meaning and apply it to real life, you then might actually come up a thought along the lines of, “if at first you don’t succeed, dust yourself off and try again”. This is a motivational statement that gives you the will to go on fighting in life.

This traditional use of proverbs has changed somewhat drastically from its simplified educative state and has now become some sort of weapon used to criticize and pass judgment, as well as being used as a shield against same.

Joseph Kariuki was born in central Kenya. As he was growing up in the high nappier grass that constituted his immediate environment due to his father’s grazing activities, he learnt to listen to stories from his mother and elders around the homestead. He heard the kikuyu proverbs over and over again.

While a student in his rural home, he learnt that proverbs meant a lot to the kikuyu people, mainly from the central highland of Kenya. Joseph Kariuki who later made it into Kenya’s first university –University of Nairobi, met the famous professor Ciaruji Chesaina, a great literature writer who has written a number of books and who later in life became Kenya’s’ first woman Ambassador to the Republic of South Africa.

“I must say she was my greatest literature proverb hero. Later in life I met Professor Gerald Wanjohi, a great philosopher from Nyeri, who again guided my thoughts and writing and made me start collecting these proverbs so that I today can be able to present them. My main sources were the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation, Nation Television, Kenya Television Network, Citizen TV, the Daily Nation, Kameme FM, Inooro FM and Cooro Fm”.

“What changed my life was meeting an American Maryknoll Father Joseph Healey MM , who has been my main collaborator in collecting these proverbs and who made it possible for the material to be published. I must say we all need the word of encouragement from this word of proverb. The late president Julius Nyerere of Tanzania punctuated many of his words by using proverbs, and this made him a great orator who knew his words and when to use them”.

I therefore cannot help but notice the context of these proverbs chosen for this compilation. They have made light some potentially explosive libelous as well slanderous expressions. The criticism was somewhat toned down, even to the extent of being comical.

For example, “Uthuri wa itonga ndununganga (Kikuyu), which if directly translated means “A rich mans fart does not smell”. A bit crude, but funny nevertheless. The political analyst using this proverb was actually targeting leaders who “speak nonsense”. That in itself would probably constitute slander if it was directly stated to the target. It may not actionable slander, but who needs the headache of the hullabaloo that could be an adjunct to it? Certainly not the journalists struggling to practice media law and ethics!

Another was “ Kiamia kimwe ciamia ciothe (Kikuyu), whose direct translation was ‘ When one uncircumcised boy defecates, all have defecated’. This was used to imply that if some government officials were corrupt, then stood to chance that the whole government was corrupt.

On the positive side of things though, the “educational” proverbs require kudos. They are very specific in their hidden message, and cannot be faulted for promoting criticism. Some examples are “Mtaka cha uvunguni sharti ainame” and “Kidole kimoja hakivunji chawa”. They are very simplistic and support hard work and unity respectively.

Therefore one can conclude that the most important aspect of proverb use lies in its interpretation. The mode and capability to do this can make or break a proverb.

The acceptance of proverb use in mainstream communication goes to show its effectiveness in dissemination of opinion, be it private or public. There is potential in this literary genre as well the ability to grow to greater heights, mainly due to its intellectually interactive nature.

Angela Taiyana is an intern with People for Peace in Africa. She is a graduate in International relations at USIU, Nairobi-Kenya.

People for Peace in Africa (PPA)
P O Box 14877
Nairobi
00800, Westlands
Kenya

E-Mail ppa@africaonline.co.ke
Tel 254-20-4441372

Website: www.peopleforpeaceafrica.org