

## Media and Proverbs Use in the Kenyan Society

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### Introduction

Today, the use of proverbs even in regions or parts of the world that for a long time have been regarded as strong oral societies such as Africa is comparatively on decline. Today, Africa continues to show or register relative low literacy levels and has witnessed decline in the use of proverbs in oral communication among its people. This is a sorry trend given the strength of her folk traditions where proverbs and proverbial usage have over the years been important in decision making in respect to various social, economic, political and cultural questions. The main cause of concern is that carriers of folk wisdom continue to age and die, yet fewer efforts to document their wealth of knowledge as encapsulated in proverbs is seen being done. Even as literacy levels continue to improve, though marginally, the use of traditional proverbs in particular remains low. However, there are emergent new forms of proverbial sayings and medium of transmitting the sayings especially in urban settings.

In many rural areas of Africa which today can be regarded the closest representation of traditional societies in terms of vernacular language use as means of daily communication, elderly people who in the true sense of the traditional set-up were the repositories of proverbial wisdom usage are slowly dying through old age. With their death also means a huge loss in terms of use of proverbs use. The emerging group of “elderly” persons are not well versed in the traditional wisdom of proverb or they don’t even know it all together. It is therefore almost difficult to find a replacement of the elderly sages well versed with African proverbial knowledge.

In both rural and urban settings, many people who could be regarded as elderly (those who are about 40 years or more), traditionally thought to be repositories and transmitters of such proverbial wisdom hardly know proverbs let alone being able to use and apply them in daily communication. In the urban areas, the situation is worsened by the wide mix of different local and international influences especially the youth culture, mass media and other modern communication technologies and channels which are going a long way in promoting new values embedded in their emergent forms of urban languages such *sheng* that in Nairobi

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is a mixture of languages such as English, Swahili and other Kenyan languages (e.g. Kikuyu, Dholuo, Kikamba, etc.).

In urban settings, the *sheng* generation who were the youth of the 1970s through the 1990s are now the parents or even the grandparents today in the country. These are the parents who grew up without the benefit of being fully immersed in the traditional tribal wisdom of proverbs characteristic of rural and upcountry dwellers.

These changes in proverbs use have also been affected by advances in information and communication technologies that had important impacts in both rural and urban areas. In other words, other than the internal social changes in African societies that have affected oral communication and proverbial use, external influences such as new technologies such as social media have affected use of proverbs in the society. These change remains to be adequately assessed on how they have affected oral communication especially the use of traditional wisdom like proverbs that used to be the hallmark of communication in traditional societies.

Many suggestions have been advanced to explain the situation of proverbs in changed social, economic and political environment such as Kenya. Key among them has been globalisation which has positioned some languages, their cultures and various forms of expression like proverbs far much ahead of others due to the wide usage in different parts of the world. In this regard, European languages and their forms of proverbial expressions have been dominant. From this domination has been the consequence that local languages and their various forms of expressions have been suppressed since they have been overwhelmed in usage compared to the European languages. Some of their users especially the young generation have tended to ape and use these foreign languages. The overall effect has been loss of important cultural and communication elements like proverbs of those often called small languages of the world. However, even in Africa some small language groups are feared to be endangered by the dominance of other languages.

What has been done or is generally being done to salvage the remaining culturally rich forms of expressions like proverbs. First, there has been a realisation by Africans and some Africanists on the need to collect and therefore salvage some of the proverbs, stories and sayings which are very rich in social and cultural materials about Africa. This has in a great way helped in better understanding the African social, political, economic and cultural environments through documentation of various communication art forms like proverbs. This

has mainly been in the academies or institutions of learning mainly focusing on collections for research and archival purposes, but hardly for practical applications purposes such as in daily communication. There is a danger a danger to such an approach in that even after proverbs are collected and stored in libraries and archives of our universities, there is a possibility that they may not be used in other way other than for academic purposes. Hence, their practical applications and use remain nonexistence or very low. On the other hand, there have been other institutions that have perhaps been unnoticed in the application and use of proverbs. This is the institution of the mass media. Yet, little is known about how this institution and its accompanying technologies in communications using the radio and the television has aided in the practical application and use of proverbs in contemporary situation while highlight the topical issues of the day.

### **1. Are proverbs relevant in the modern world?**

Many people today are sceptical of the role that proverbs can play in modern society. Put in the proper African context, the concern is whether proverbs play any meaningful role in people's daily lives. This is the question that Healey & Sybertz (1996)<sup>2</sup> have grappled with in attempting to define what the African proverb is. They ask: "are African proverbs a relic of the past? And, are they quaint expressions that will gradually die out with new generations of people? These issues are debatable because in the Kenyan context for instance there are pockets of people in media and wider society who find proverbs having important roles in daily lives and in various sectors of society. The situation is even more elaborate amongst people living in rural areas. On the other hand, among the young and the more urbanised people, the use of proverbs is questionable especially with the rise in hybrid languages like *sheng* that have brought about new forms of youth expressions that take care of the youth needs and aspirations. These include modern sayings, expressions or phrases that are in common daily use. In Kenya urban settings today, these expressions are not associated with any particular ethnic community. However, the rise of vernacular media outlets especially the radio that have become popular among different age groups both in urban and rural setting have changed and complicated the situation.

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<sup>2</sup> Healey J.G and Sybertz, D. (1996), *Towards an African Narrative Theology*, Nairobi: Paulines Publication Africa.

This article advances the line of thinking that proverbs have a role to play in contemporary society and that is why they are continuously finding relevance and practical use by influential societal institutions like the mass media and also amongst different classes of people. Among the important uses is the well-known role of proverbs teaching, counselling and above all when looked from the perspectives of the role that media plays in society; that of provoking public concerns and debate on various topical issues in the country through persuasive communication.

In Kenya, however, there is widespread use of Swahili proverbs as opposed to local language-proverbs as Swahili is the national language used daily on television and in learning institutions. It is also the Lingua Franca for the East African region. This helps Swahili proverbial messages popular and enables get to as many people as possible who listens to the radios and televisions especially at the national level. At the local level, use of ethnic proverbial expressions is also advanced by the increasing popular community radio stations that use vernacular languages. This scenario of national and local media use to promote proverbial expressions favours Swahili language proverbs of the regional/national spread of use of Swahili. Therefore, ethnic languages remain only localised to specific regions and thus threatened with death altogether because of restricted use. The vernacular language radio frequencies are determined and confined to the geographical borders of a specific local language.

Therefore, for both national and local media, the increasing efforts to use of proverbs in the mass media in Kenya seems to be deliberate effort to interest radio listeners and television viewers in this important form of spicing modern communications with traditional African linguistic feel. This interest in proverbs and sayings recognises the facts that these forms of communications are living art forms and not relics of the past as have been argued by some critics. They have a certain role to play in communicating and educating in the contemporary society. So, for the mass media practitioners, and specific users such as politicians, social commentators, the clergy, etc. proverbs have local use and relevance in the contemporary society.

## **2. Proverbs and the Media in Kenya**

The liberalisation of media in the late 1990s opened up the Kenya society for the better. This helped create both national and local media outlets thus enabling reaching the

diverse populations in a diverse range of languages of choice that range from English, Swahili and the more than 30 local languages<sup>3</sup>. Has this media pluralism enabled more and more application of traditional proverbs or not? Is the media pluralism the ultimate antidote to the reversion of the downward trend in the use of traditional proverbs? A look into the recent history of mass media in Kenya is in order for an explanation of the media pluralism and proverbs use. For a better understanding of the media dynamics that has led to the scenario we are talking about, a brief explanation of the recent media development is in order.

### **2.1. Proverbs use and the era of state broadcasting**

The media freedom being enjoyed in Kenya today has been a consequence of a very trying period in the quest for freedom of expression and of free press that had been witnessed in the country in the 1980s and the 1990s. For a period of about a decade and half when political and governance space was dominated by one party (Kenya African National Union) rule, there was an equally dominance of state friendly media houses that did not allow free expression of alternative views. The political system and its media organs hardly allowed expression of alternative opinion and so many Kenya were socialised into an atmosphere of fear. Indeed, expression in local languages was at times interpreted by the state in subversive terms. This is true particularly considering the way Kenyans who sought to express themselves in local language medium were persecuted. A case in point in renowned Kenyan author Ngugi wa Thiong'o who had composing community theatre and plays in his Kikuyu language. His experiment in community theatre in the play *Ngaahika Ndenda* ("I will marry when I want") led to his imprisonment and was forced exile in the 1980s. In short, the use of local idiom was interpreted as a way of inciting local people against the state. Various other media and communication channels like opposition magazines such as *society*, *Nairobi Law Monthly* and *Finance* were closed down and their publishers persecuted for offering alternative thoughts through the print media.

The main information channels were offered by the national (state) broadcaster Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC) formerly Voice of Kenya (VOK) radio and television with radio having regional based broadcast frequencies that allowed limited (about two hours) transmission in local language. Broadcasting in local languages was allocated different

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<sup>3</sup> There are 42 ethnic communities but not all of them have media outlets in vernacular.

transmission times during the day. Some languages were however allocated more airtime even in the day long local language transmission. For instance, the Kikuyu language had double time allotments. Allotment of time was in the morning between 5.00 am and 8.00 am and between 8.00 am and midnight. Although in such cases there was possibilities for use of the proverbs by the radio, more usage have been possible with the with the twenty four hour radio station which was started at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century with the lead provided by *Kameme* FM, the first 24 hours local language (Kikuyu) radio broadcaster.

At the national scene, KBC national radio service that had broadcasts in Swahili had a fairly good use of Swahili proverbs, sayings and expressions compared to the local languages radio transmissions. This national broadcast also ensured country wide reach of various programmes. This was made possible by the popularity of certain programmes that devoted more time to Swahili language. Such programmes included *Je huu ni ungwana?* (“Is this gentlemanly?”). Other programmes devoted up to half an hour on reciting poems mostly in Swahili. As a social commentary programme the presenter Leonard Mambo Mbotela used many Swahili proverbs to advise, admonish and criticise certain unbecoming behaviours of people in various context such offices, homes, bus stops, etc.

In most cases, late afternoon broadcasting by KBC’s Swahili service also presented Kenyans with opportunity to express themselves in proverbial terms through greeting cards sent to the station and read out by broadcasters. It is indeed during this time that such Swahili sayings and proverbial expressions such as *salaamu ndio nusu ya kuonana* (greetings [over the radio] is like the half-way physical meeting of friends) became a national clarion on the need to greet friend and relatives over the radio. Other radio/television programmes targeting schools especially over the weekend were the other good opportunities of using proverbial expressions, sayings and stories for education purposes. Most radio stations have adopted this early lead by the state broadcaster to educate, entertain and inform.

In the sense of the popularity of Swahili expressions, the state dominance era was vital in that it promoted expressions with huge impact given that majority of the people in the country listened to the only two media outlets, the KBC Swahili service and the KBC English service. In other words, information that came through the KBC radio services became the shared or common knowledge to a majority of Kenya.

## **2.2. Media liberalisation: A shot in the arm for use and application of proverbs?**

Following the introduction of the multiparty politics in early 1990s following repeal of laws (section 2A of the *Constitution*) that had made Kenya a one party state, a new eagerness to introduce multiple media outlets to provide alternative voices to the official version of information, opinion and views became apparent. Although the freeing of airwaves and legalisation of private radio and television stations did not start until well towards the end of the 1990s, a number of new initiatives in the media especially in what was called alternative press emerged. This was in the form of increased use of vernacular language media that used indigenous modes of expressions such as stories, proverbs and sayings especially in the form of newspapers. For instance, in the print media, there was rise in A4 size, 8-12 pages newspapers in local languages such as Kikuyu, Dholuo, Kamba, Taita, and Luhya, etc. However some of these publications were still perceived by the government of the day to be sympathetic to the opposition. They were therefore constantly being monitored, harassed and even banned. A good example was the Kikuyu newspaper *Inooro* (“The Sharpener”) published by the Murang’a Diocese of the Catholic Church in central Kenya. It was banned on the basis that it was promoting Kikuyu ethnic chauvinism even though it was started by the church and it mainly highlighted topical issues in society and on religion. After it was banned, it was quickly replaced by another newspaper, *Mwihoko* (“Hope”) by the same publisher. This new publication continues to be published to date. *Mwihoko* was different in that it attracted well known writers as its contributors and columnists such as the satirist Wahome Mutahi and other writers who used Gikuyu folklore very well in their writing. For the purpose of this article, it is important to note this newspaper is replete with usage of proverbs<sup>4</sup>.

The biggest thing that happened in Kenya in terms of use of proverbs (especially Swahili proverbs) has been the emergence and the continued popularity of private television and radio stations. Today, Kenya has five main television stations that broadcast in English and Swahili languages; Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC), Nation Television (NTV), K24, Kenya Television Network (KTN), and Citizen TV. For the television stations, the use of Swahili in their news and local content programmes have helped promote use of proverbs and sayings, either through news items that capture public figures who use proverbs, local

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<sup>4</sup> Past copies of this newspaper and other Kikuyu language newspapers like *Murata* (“Friend”), *Wathiomu Mukinyu* (“The True Friend”) were very useful to this writer when he was researching and compiling the proverbs data base for the book, *Under one roof: Kikuyu proverbs consolidated* (edited by Gerald, G Wanjohi, Pauline’s Publications limited, Nairobi, 2001

soap operas or by having short television episodes devoted to political satire that mainly use Swahili language.

The radio, especially the vernacular stations, has perhaps been the best shot in the arm in terms of promotion of proverbs and proverbial use today. With the use of indigenous languages targeted at native speakers of a particular language, the radio has become an important forum in which local lore of Kenyan communities is discussed, issues argued out, and debates generated. And what a better way to win arguments over the radio when a group of people understanding a certain language listens through the use of its proverbs! In other words, most vernacular programming is spiced with folk wisdom and when not expressed through discussions and call-in talks on radio, it is expressed in the local music played in the stations.

### **2.3. Proverbs Use and Vernacular Radio Stations: The *Kameme FM* lead**

Kenya today counts more than fifty community radio stations. In total there are more than 80 radio stations across the country. Most community radio stations use vernacular languages targeting specific or particular linguistic group. Therefore, they target particular geographical regions for audience. However, migration of people to urban areas, towns and cities has made this regional and linguistic radio broadcast targeting a challenge. In a city like Nairobi which is cosmopolitan population-wise, the FM band is very congested with different radio frequencies such that the city has become like the tower of Babel. Indeed, most of the vernacular radio stations in the country broadcast from Nairobi. The centrality of Nairobi to vernacular broadcasting is also due to ability to access advertising money, resources and infrastructure on which the radio depends for it to thrive as a business.

All the changes witnessed in radio broadcast in Kenya was started by the emergence of Kameme FM as the first community radio station broadcasting in the Kikuyu language in the year 1999. It was the first community radio station to be allowed to broadcast on a 24 hours basis using a local language, Kikuyu. At its introduction, its frequency reach was Nairobi and its environs (Kiambu, Thika, Kajiado North areas) which are inhabited by a large Kikuyu population. Because of its popularity at its inception, it caused the government owned Kenya Broadcasting Corporation to start another Kikuyu radio, *Coro FM* to stem its popularity. Indeed, there was also another private investment in a Kikuyu radio, *Inooro FM*,



owned by the Royal Media Group. But it's the *Kameme* FM unique programming that endeared it to its listeners especially through its emphasis on the Kikuyu cultural idioms.

From the very beginning, *Kameme* FM's content was unique as it emphasized use of oral literature art forms such as proverbs, sayings and stories through Kikuyu music, call-in sessions and other programmes. At the beginning, a key focus of its programmes was a daily sessions in which Kikuyu proverbs were elaborated. This was through assigning an elderly man well versed in Kikuyu proverbs to elaborate proverbs, Kikuyu culture and history to listeners in a 15-20 minute sessions. Furthermore, interest in the Kikuyu language and culture had led the station to start the *Kameme* Language Centre where language and cultural issues and training were done. The station also introduced airplay on old kikuyu music of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s which is laden with the community's repertoire of idiomatic expressions and culture. The station also had very elaborate programmes enlightening listeners on traditional Kikuyu lifestyles in areas like marriage, food, dress, etc. Today, with competition for air-time for advertisement time and other programmes, such arrangement of devoting time for such things as proverbs discussion is continually becoming minimal and constrained. And this applies to almost all vernacular radio stations.

Other than the *Kameme* FM example, there has been other innovative ways of promoting proverbs use through the radio. For instance, for a long time, the BBC radio service broadcasting in East Africa in Swahili as well as in its Africa service in English devotes the first few minutes of its broadcast to a narration and brief exposition of "daily proverbs", all of which are contributed by listeners. This is especially in the *Focus on Africa* programme. A good number of Kenyan makes contributions by sending proverbs from their language groups. This is one innovative way of promoting community specific proverbs use to a continent wide audience as a way to exchange ideas on various issues affecting a big proportion of the continent's people. Furthermore, given that such proverbs are broadcasted to different people who are original users of the proverbs, the radio then becomes a good medium of teaching problems to non-users.

### **3. Recent patterns in the use of proverbs and proverbial sayings in the media**

From the analysis above, it is clear that the use of proverbs and other proverbial expressions in the media has been undergoing tremendous changes. The change was first manifested in the vernacular print media, followed by vernacular radio stations, through to

the national television. Most recently the shift in use of proverbs by Kenyans has shifted to the social media especially Facebook. It is however notable that the print media, especially the A4-size vernacular newspapers has almost folded up.

In Nairobi where these changes originate and end, only a few vernacular newspapers and magazines are stocked by newspaper vendors. Most importantly, the remaining newspapers are largely those published by the church especially the Catholic Church. They include *Wathiamo Mukinyu* published by the Consolata Catholic Fathers of Nyeri and *Mwihoko*, published by the Murang'a Catholic Diocese. Even the remaining vernacular papers do not have widespread readership as they are distributed through the church channels such as church bookshops thus only targeting the church followers. This poor readership is a worrying trend because it had been hoped that a continued and successful publication of vernacular newspapers would help promote knowledge of proverbs and application of local idioms encapsulated in the proverb genres. At the same time, publication in local languages would help document the proverbs for future generations especially in the face of eminent death of the elderly people who for long have been the repositories and carriers of traditional wisdom. A recent addition to vernacular media in the Kikuyu language is the high quality magazine, *Micii-ini iitu* ("Inside Our Homes"). The magazine focus on typical issues in the country while at the same time using local idioms and expressions to discuss how to start and run good families in the fast changing the Kenya society using prominent and successful families as role models. It uses a Kikuyu proverb, *Muugi ni Mutaare*, (*a wise person is well advised*) as its motto.

### **3.1. Media, proverbs use and political mobilisation**

One of the consequences of freeing the media from the stranglehold of the state was to provide opportunity for multiple outlets and medium of expression for various actors in the Kenyan society. The vernacular radio stations have been useful and effective in communicating social, economic, political and cultural information. For instance, all vernacular radio stations in Kikuyu language (*Kameme FM*, *Coro FM*, *Inooro FM* that this writer is more familiar with have programmes designed to transmit all round information affecting the community such better farming practices, current state of commodity market, social networking through radio greetings, health messages on HIV/AIDS and other diseases as well as reproductive health. Over and above mere transmission of such important

information, the take-home-messages are delivered with lasting impact using local idioms and proverbs. This makes the vernacular radio station have far reaching impacts in the application of these messages by radio listeners in their daily lives.

The vernacular media has also been used for political mobilisation during the elections of 2007 and 2013. It is however, in the political mobilisation where the negative impacts of the vernacular radio station in Kenya have had global reach and consequences. Different sections of the Kenyan society have used the opportunity presented by the multiple media outlets to further specific interests, some with devastating outcomes to society on issues such as ethnic fragmentation. From the radio, the mobile phone, to social media, the last decade has seen some negative use proverbs and proverbial sayings in Kenya. This was particularly apparent in the divisive campaigns in run-up to the December 2007 general election that resulted in post-election violence that threatened to tear apart the Kenyan social fabric. Hence, in spite of their popularity, the main weakness of vernacular radio stations is the tendency to be misused for narrow ethnic and political interests. In the 2007 post-election violence, the vernacular radio stations were accused of fuelling the chaos as well as planning the violence. Like in the Rwandan genocide, vernacular radio stations were used by politicians using distinct tribal communication codes to incite listeners to violence against other communities living in their neighbourhood. Coded language, ethnic slurs and references such as *madoadoa* (“spots”), *kwekwe* (“wild grass”), etc. which were cited as having been used to fan tribal animosity by the vernacular radio stations<sup>5</sup>.

The use of ethnic slurs and expressions such as the “forty-one against one” was blamed for the proliferation of ethnic hatred during the 2007 election<sup>6</sup>. Prior to the elections, such slurs and proverbial expressions were used to consolidate ethnic votes among the populous communities (the Kalenjin, the Kikuyu and the Luo) who were at the thick of this conflict. The vernacular radio stations were at the heart of this political mobilisation. In all, vernacular radio station in political mobilisation during the 2007/2008 elections and the subsequent violence that ensued have largely been attributed to the fanning of ethnic emotions. One of the four accused as being responsible for bearing the greatest responsibility of the chaos during the violence at the International Crimes Court at The Hague, Netherlands is a journalist with a vernacular radio station (*Kass FM*). He is alleged to have used his radio station to fund and mobilise ethnic hatred in the Rift Valley using cryptic ethnic language.

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<sup>5</sup>See Report of The Commission of Inquiry into Post Election Violence (CIPEV)

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

Kikuyu Radio stations especially *Kameme* FM and *Inooro* FM were equally mentioned by the commission investigating the cause of the electoral violence as having whipped up ethnic emotions of their audiences using hate speech corded in ethnic expressions especially in call-in shows, did during the election period (CIPEV, 2008).

Despite the unfortunate events of the 2007 elections and the ensuing violence, politicians in Kenya have over the years used proverbs and rhetorical expressions for political mobilisation. Indeed, Kenyan folk musicians who are experts in the use of artistic proverbial expressions as well as the politicians themselves have used proverbs and other proverbial sayings with an amazingly amount of success in campaigns. For instance, in central Kenya, popular Kikuyu musicians are the darling of politicians (and more recently marketing firms) because of the way their music appeal to their fans. Any politician wishing to draw crowds have to get the services of musicians and artists, both religious and secular to fill stadiums and other public venues with people. Once mobilised this way, politician gets an opportunity to address them and deliver electoral pledges. During these high political seasons, catchy political sayings and proverbs assume heightened political relevance in Kenya. Election years particularly prove to be good for proverbs as politicians use proverbs as one of the tools to win support over rivals. In central Kenya for instance it has been a long time tradition for politicians to contract well known musicians from the region and incorporate them into their campaign teams just because of their gift of the garb and ability to turn proverbial wisdom to suit local situation.

Politicians have over the years used proverbs as rhetorical devices and means to pass their message across and impress the electorate with notions that they are experts in use of proverbial words to win arguments. To them, to use Chinua Achebe's phrase *proverbs are the palm wine with which words are eaten*<sup>7</sup>. Election time has therefore become a high season for proverbs use and politicking using proverbs. There are is also creation of new expressions in elections periods that gain widespread appeal in the country. A few examples are in order:

In the 1990s, the clamour for political pluralism saw new proverbial expressions created that revolved around certain political personalities. These expressions are used as political rhetorical tools to mobilise the public around these politicians or certain political causes. One good example is the expressions, *Tiba la Katiba ni Matiba* (*The cure to the constitutional problems in Kenya is Matiba*). The phrase was used by Mr. Matiba then, a

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<sup>7</sup> Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, East African Education Publishers, Nairobi, 2003.

leading opposition figure who was believed by his supporters to be the best person in spearheading the constitutional reform agenda in the country. He was also associated with the popular clarion call of *let the people decide*. It was used by Matiba and his supporters who believed that only involving the people in voting for an opposition candidate to face the then incumbent president Moi in 1992 was the best and democratic way of identifying leaders instead of using the delegate system. The same phrase, *let the people decide*, was used by Uhuru Kenyatta, the current president, as he fought the push by civil society arguments that he was unfit to run for the presidency due to his indictment by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for crime against humanity charges at The Hague, Netherlands over the violence that affected the country in the 2007/2008 election period.

In the 2013 elections there were also other uses of proverbial expressions and rhetorical phrases which was enhanced by emergence of social media especially Facebook and Twitter. The best example of such political clichés popularised in the media can best be captured by presidential candidate Peter Kenneth's *Tunawesmake*, the *sheng* version of Obama's campaign expressions, *Yes, We Can*. This phrase and its various modification became the most widely used during the election period.

During the campaign period and all through the conduct of the election, Kenyans using the social media to campaign for their different candidates continued to modify the *Tunawesmake* phrase to fit particular circumstances. For instance, the phrase was modified by supporters of Uhuru Kenyatta urging Peter Kenneth *Anaweswait* (*He can wait*) or suspend his presidential ambition until a later date. This was in reference to the fact that Kenneth's bid for the presidency could spoil or divide the votes of Uhuru Kenyatta in Central Kenya from where both candidates came thus decreasing Uhuru's chances of getting enough votes in his Central Kenya stronghold. A second instance where Kenneth's expression was modified was when there was system failure in the electronic transmission of election results from the constituencies across the country to the National Tallying Centre in Nairobi. When the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) adopted the manual vote tallying system and transmissions of the vote results, Kenyan started tweeting and send messages on Facebook to the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission saying, *wanaweswait*, (*They can wait*) for manual tally as long it would guarantees a credible and fair electoral process.

At another level in relation to political mobilisation, and the use of proverbs and proverbial expressions, there are politicians especially at the national levels who are just

experts in political artistry of use proverbs. Raila Odinga, the former Prime Minister picks the top price in this regard especially due this knack for use of *vitendawili* (riddles) and football analogies and commentaries to attract political audiences. Even his political adversaries have come to refer him as *mtu wa vitendawili*, riddle's man. One of the many proverbs he has used to convince his audiences is *Ukweli ukihidhiri, uogo hujitenga* (*When truth is presented, lies are set aside*). He has used the question-response nature of many African proverbs to enable participation of his audiences in his speeches. For instance, in the immediate proverb above, he utters the first part of the proverb and the audience complete it with the second part, thus:

Raila: *Ukweli ukihidhiri...*

Audience: *...Uogo hujitenga*

True to the characterisation of Raila as a proverbs/riddle political man, he has continued to use proverbs to explain the outcome of the elections and the reality of his defeat in the presidential race by Uhuru Kenyatta in the 2013 elections. Addressing his supporters in Kisumu city about the decision of the Supreme Court of Kenya to dismiss his petition to invalidate the election of Kenyatta, he used the Swahili proverb; *Kuvunjika kwa mwika sio mwisho wa upishi* (*If a cooking stick breaks, that does not mean that is the end of cooking*). This has been interpreted in the media to mean that even after his electoral defeat, there are other opportunities for him in which he can serve the country.

As mentioned, this question-response nature of many proverbs is common in many proverbs and it enables easy involvement of the user and his audiences in articulation, understanding and use of proverbs. It's this very nature that lays the basis of proverbs value in political mobilisation. This can be illustrated by another example. In the following proverb, the proverb is posed by the interlocutor and the audience completes the remaining part of the proverb thus:

Interlocutor: *Asiyesikia la mkuu...* (He who does not listen to the elderly)

Audience: *...huvunjikia guu* (breaks his/her leg)

Interlocutor: *Mwenda pole...* (he who walks slowly)

Audience: *...hajikwai* (does not get hurt).

Posed this way, politicians are able to work out crowds emotionally through convincing speeches spiced with proverbs and other oral artistic forms that make them memorable in the mind of the audiences. This way they bring a new sense of freshness to

political speeches that captivates and bring audiences to their sides. In this regard, certain politicians have used this characteristic of Kenyan proverbs to effective use and to their advantage.

A different scenario where this nature of posing proverbs becomes useful is in educational and training programmes in the media. It particularly applies in many children programmes on the radio where children from different schools are invited into studio to take part in children programmes. In all Kikuyu radio stations, such programmes are run on Saturday morning. In most cases, one child acting as an interlocutor poses part of the proverb and invites other colleagues especially on an individual basis to respond. However, in most such cases, the test is on knowledge of the proverbs other than ability to use or apply them in conversation or speeches.

Other politicians' interest in the use of proverbs in their speeches or in radio or television shows include Koigi Wamwere, former Member of Parliament for Subukia and Mwangi Kiunjuri, former Member of Parliament of Laikipia East. For Mwangi, in his concession statement on his defeat for the governor of Laikipia country position contained in a paid up advertisement on the *Daily Nation* Newspaper 16/3/2013, he used a proverb *Utatiga Ndona*" (*One who never concedes never gets*) to drive the point home on the need to concede when defeated. This was in response to the electoral commission urging defeated candidates to understand that in any competition there is bound to be winners and losers. This message was emphasised by different people who urged presidential aspirant Raila Odinga to accept defeat in the presidential race using a popular Swahili proverb, *asiye kubali kushindwa sio mushindani*, (*he who refuses to accept defeat is not at all a good competitor*).

The 2013 elections as with other election presented different actors with interest in the political process tapping into the use of proverbs and proverbial phrases. Some popular phrases used in the 2013 electoral process were also in *sheng*, all intended to target the youth who are associated with this urban language which is a combination of Swahili, English and other local languages. For instance, to pass the message of peace, civic education materials like posters bore important *sheng* messages. One of the most popularly used phrase wa *zuia Noma* (*maintain peace*). It was used by the civil society organisation, Centre for Multiparty Democracy (CMD) to campaign for a peaceful election. This has largely been on the need to learn from the experiences of the 2007/2008 post-election violence and behave different during the 2013 election so as to maintain the social fabric of the Kenyan society.

### **3.2. Social media as a new platform for proverbs use in Kenya**

As implied from the analysis above, the social media have become a new medium for promoting use of proverbs. The emergence of social media like Facebook, Twitter, etc. has offered communities a virtual forum to post, discuss proverbs and sayings and appreciate their cultural values and traditions using various languages of expression. For instance, a cursory search on Facebook shows that all the major communities and language groups in the Kenya have pages devoted to elucidation, discussions, and even creation of awareness on proverbs in their languages. In some language groups there are multiple Facebook pages on proverbs and sayings.

Languages whose some of their members have opened Facebook pages include the Luhya, Luo, Kalenjin, Kamba, and Kikuyu. Going by the membership to various proverbs groups, it appears Kikuyu proverbs groups on Facebook are more popular. Two of the groups that are most popular from the Kikuyu language are “100 Kikuyu proverbs” and “If this group reaches 1,000,000 Facebook will be translated in Kikuyu” have daily hits getting to about 400. While the former group is an open group mainly confined to posting of proverbs, the latter have more activities that even include compilation of proverbs. This group’s Facebook link<sup>8</sup> has 260 proverbs with English translations and English equivalent compiled and posted on the page. It has also some in depth elaborations of proverbs targeting its 23,385 members (by March 16, 2013), one of the most popular pages that discuss proverbs in the social media in Kenya. This big membership shows community members’ interest in proverbs and the opportunities the new media forms presents to community groups in promoting their proverbs and cultural ideas to the world.

### **Conclusion**

The media in Kenya has been very useful in promoting proverbs and proverbial usage. The radio has been useful in promoting traditional proverbs especially in the case of vernacular stations. For the newly coined proverbial phrases, the television has been very effective in terms of impact on audiences. This has especially been through stand-up comedy shows and satiric programmes that have been started by different television stations. Since the late 1990s there have been programmes that have drawn large audiences due to playing around with words to pass very important message in proverbial form. These include

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.facebook.com/groups/agikuyuAngai/doc/10150289965372529>



reddykulas (NTV), Bulls eye (NTV), Mizigwe (K24), Churchill Live (NTV), amongst others. They have become the new fora where old as well as new proverbial expressions especially in the national languages are disseminated and applied in real life situations amongst Kenyans.

Other than enlivening the lives of Kenyan, the media using proverbs and sayings have been passing important message to citizens by critiquing and appreciating the Kenyan society. This has been especially for new emergent proverbial sayings. This shows that as society develops, new emergent modes of communities speaking themselves are being put to good use. The use of print media has by and large however disadvantaged popular use of traditional proverbs and lore. Other than for the vernacular radio stations, existence of traditional proverbs use remains endangered. This points out to the fact that oral media remains the most important way of perpetuating use of proverbs in society today. This point is underlined by the near collapse of vernacular print media which would otherwise have helped in documenting them.

In all, the continued use of proverbs in the media in spite of the changes affecting society and the ways of transmitting the proverbs shows that proverbial wisdom continue to be relevant to many communities in Kenya in their daily lives. This is why social media presents the new fora as an opportunity in which traditional proverbs enthusiasts have to invest in for use and application of this wisdom and knowledge going into the future. Indeed, given the many problems that confronts any society, use of tradition wisdom encapsulated in proverbs becomes useful in explain and even resolving challenges in the modern society by diverse section of society such as religious people, health workers politicians, and even ordinary mortals.

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