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POLITICS IN SWAHILI PROVERBS

by

Albert Scheven

In East Africa proverbs are used for almost every occasion. They are a code of conduct, a treasury of wisdom; a unique way of declaring truths and stimulating thoughts. Happy the elder who can settle a dispute by pointing to an appropriate proverb.

Proverbs are precious to discover the thought process of a people, the influence of religion, the philosophy of life and the foreign influences on a culture. It is interesting to examine how different cultures express the same thought. But proverbs are tricky for although they contain a good deal of truth in a few words, they do not contain the whole kernel. Listening to two people well versed in proverbs state their opposite points of view with equally adequate proverbs is often an enlightening experience.

Proverbs abound in modern Swahili writing. Stories in school primers end with a proverb to sum up the moral. Since Swahili was -and is- a lingua franca in several countries of East Africa, it has been enriched by contact with many Bantu cultures. Contact with Arab, Portuguese, and other foreign influences have also added to this richness. Swahili proverbs have another advantage in having been recorded in writing at an early date. One example is a collection of some 600 proverbs published in 1891 by W.E. Taylor, (*African Aphorisms; Saws from Swahili land.* London: S.P.C.K.).

This selection of proverbs has been applied to the American political scene in the hope of providing a timely and entertaining reminder of the universality of human wisdom. They are reproduced with their dialectical differences as I found them recorded. The political allusions are mine.

Democracy

Penye wengi pana mengi.

Where there are many people, there are many disputes.

Wengi wape.

To many it is wise to yield.

Akili ni nywele, kila mtu ana zake.

Brains are like hair, every one has his own kind. (opinion)

Bamba na waume bamba, hakuna bamba la mume.

Counsel of a number of men is counsel; there is no counsel of one person alone.

The Common Man

Chura mzuia maji ndovu akitamani.

A frog can prevent a thirsty elephant from drinking. (by getting stuck in his trunk)

Mnyonge kupata haki ni mwenye nguvu kupenda.

A poor man's getting his rights depends on the powerful man's liking.

Dua la kuku halinpati mwewe.

The curse of a chicken does not bother the hawk.

The Party

Meno ya mbwa hayaumani.

Canines do not bite one another.

Ndugu muwi afadhali kuwa naye.

*A bad brother is far better than no brother.
Cf. Blood is thicker than water.*

Nifae la mvua, nikufae la jua.

Do me a favor during the rainy season and I shall do you a favor during the dry season.

Usipoziba ufa, utajenga ukuta.

Unless you fill up the crack, you will have to build a new wall.

Cf. A stitch in time saves nine.

Mend party cracks.

Vita vya panzi ni furaha ya kunguru.

A fight between two grasshoppers is a joy to crows.

Wapiganapo tembo, nyasi humia.

Where two elephants fight the grass is hurt.

Penye kuku wengi hapamwagwimtama.

*Where there are many fowls, millet is not scattered.
Keep your secrets hidden.*

Waarabu wa Pemba, hujuaana kwa vilembo.

The Swahili can tell each other by the turban they wear.

Chombo hakiendi ila kwa nyenzo.

*You cannot launch a ship without rollers.
Cooperation is needed to do great things.*

Party Switching

Kuku akiacha wana yuna mayai matumboni.

*When a chicken leaves her brood, she is with eggs.
If somebody leaves his old party he has something up his sleeve.*

Mpanda farasi wawili hupasuka msamba.

He who mounts two horses, splits in two.

Mkia wa nyani haumbanduki nyani.

*An ape's tail never becomes detached.
His habits never change.*

Shoka husahau, mti hausahau.

*The axe forgets, the tree does not forget.
The one who inflicts the insult may forget, but the one insulted will not.*

Usiache mbachao kwa msala upitao.

Do not abandon your old prayer-mat for one you see in passing.

Campaigning

Mkono usioweza kuukata ubusu.

Kiss the hand you cannot cut off.

Mja kiwa sawa, kambiwa yu kombo.

Even if a person is straight, they will say that he is crooked.

Mwenye shoka hakosi kuni.

*He who has an axe lacks no firewood.
A keen campaigner always finds issues.*

Uwongo wa mganga ni nafuu ya mwele.

*Even the lies of a witch doctor are relief to the sick people.
When people are desperate, they will believe anybody.*

Akutukanaye hakuchagulii tusi.

He who insults you does not pick his words.

Ukicha kutajwa hutatenda jambo.

*If you are afraid to be talked about, you will not do anything.
If you go public you must have thick skin.*

Jumbe asiye mataza haamkiwi.

*The headman who has no rice gruel for his morning guests is
not paid a visit.*

Mkono mtupu haulambwi.

The empty hand is not kissed.

Mtego bila chambo haunasi.

A trap without bait catches nothing.

Msasi haogopi miiba.

A hunter must not be afraid of thorns.

Angiao baharini howea.

He who goes into the sea must swim.

Mambo yafaayo watu ni yangiayo chunguni.

*The matters that are important to people are those which go
into the cooking pot.
Bread and butter issues.*

Gonga gogo usikilize mlio wake.

*Knock the log to hear the sound it makes.
Call his bluff to discover what he is really like.*

Ulimi hauna mfupa.

*The tongue has no bone.
It can go round anything; it's unreliable.*

Mtaka cha mvunguni huinama.

*He who wants something from under the bed must stoop for it.
The box with clothing is under the bed.
If you want something you must work for it.*

Mwenye njaa haoni miiko.

*A hungry man has no taboos.
Nothing stops an ambitious person.*

Shoka lisilo mpini halichanji kuni.

*An axe without a handle does not split firewood.
Be prepared for the job.*

Mshale usio nyoya hauendi mbali.

*An arrow without its feather will not go far.
Generalities have no impact.*

Heri adui mwerevu kama rafiki mpumbavu.

It is often better to have a clever enemy than a blundering friend.

Kidole kimoja hakivunji chawa.

*A single finger does not kill a louse.
Cooperation is needed in order to succeed.*

Kila mwamba ngoma, ngozi huivutia kwake

Everyone who stretches the skin on a drum, pulls the skin to his own side.

Ngoma ivumayo haikawii kupasuka.

*A loud drum will soon split.
Loud promises are hollow.*

Nahodha mtaka chombo si mjinga wa safari.

A captain who desires a ship should know how to handle it.

Msafiri ni aliye pwani.

*He who is on the beach will board the ship.
An early campaign pays off.*

Akisema mwendawazimu msikiaji awe na akili.

If a mad man talks the listener should have some wits.

Failure

Kulekeza si kufuma.

Aiming is not the same as hitting.

Wa nyuma mbele hafiki.

The one who is behind does not arrive in front.

Mficha uchi hazai.

*One who hides his nakedness will never bear a child.
One must take the appropriate means to succeed.*

Mbio za sakafuni huishia ukingoni.

Running on a smooth floor ends on the edge.

Careless haste brings disaster.

Upaa wa kanga haustahimili mzigo.

*The crown of a guinea-fowl cannot support a load.
An unqualified person cannot bear public trust.*

Ngozi ya paa haikai watu wawili.

The hide of a gazelle does not seat two people.

Masazo ya ndovu majani makavu.

The leftovers of an elephant are withered leaves.

Mmeza ung'ongo kajiona.

*He who swallows a hard strip of raffia is aware of it.
A failure hurts.*

Mwana-mongwe ali kwao, na mchanga hangelile.

*If the nobly born had stayed in his native land, he would
have eaten sand.*

A person who leaves the protection of his kin may expect s

Success

Kuzima koleo si mwisho wa uhunzi.

Cooling the tongs is not the end of forging.

Imara ya jembe kaingoje shamba.

The toughness of the hoe is tested in the garden.

Kulea mimba si kazi, kazi kulea mwana.

*It is not hard to nurse a pregnancy, what is difficult is
bring up the child.*

Mwenye kisu kikali ndiye atakayekula nyama.

*The one with the sharp knife will eat meat.
The alert and ready person gets the job.*

Bahati ni chudi.

Luck is a matter of effort.

People In Power

Mpendā ngazi hushuka.

He who climbs a ladder will come down.

Angenda juu kipungu hafikilii mbinguni.

Even if the hawk goes high, he does not reach the heavens.

Mtaka yote hukosa yote.

He who wants all, loses all.

Aliye juu yu juu; mwidi haliwi na funo.

He who is above is above; a beast of prey is not devoured by an antelope.

Aliyekupa kiti, ndiye aliyenipa mimi kumbi.

He who gave you a throne, gave me a stool.

Ukaubwa ni jaa.

Bring high up is like being in a garbage dump.

The one at the top has to take a lot of abuse.

Ashibaye hamjui mwenye njaa.

He who has had a full meal does not know the hungry person.

Party Favors

Mla kikoa asilipe yuna kipara cheupe.

The diner who does not pay when his turn comes is a marked man.

Alisifuye jua limenwangaza.

The sun has shone on him who praises it.

Mla mbuzi hulipa ng'ambe.

He who eats a goat pays back a cow.

One has to pay double for received favors.

Kivuli cha mvumo huwafunika walio mbali.

The shadow of the Palmira palm provides shelter for those who are far away.

Big donors become ambassadors.

Mfuatana na Mmanga hunukato.

He who follows an Arab smells well.

If you follow a successful person you will bask in glory.

Atetemeshae mti wenye matunda hutaraji matunda kunwangukia.

He who shakes a fruit tree expects some fruit to fall his way.

Mtegemea nundu haachi kunona.

He who relies on the tasty hump (of the Zebu cow) will not fail to grow fat.

Usisahau ubaharia kwa sababu ya unahodha.

Do not forget sailorship because of captaincy.

Mwenye nguvu mpishe.

Let the strong man pass by.

Corruption

Samaki huanza kuoza kichwani.

A fish begins to rot at its head.

Kukopa harusi, kulipa matanga.

Borrowing is like a wedding, repaying is like a funeral.

Penye urembo ndipo urinbo.

Where there is beauty there is a trap.

Ndege mjanja hunaswa na tundu bovu.

An artful bird is trapped in a rotten cage.

The smartest fox is caught at last.

Mla kwa miwili hana mwisho mwema.

He who eats with both hands will come to a bad end.

Big mouthfuls often choke.

Investigation; Leaks

Mzika pembe ndiye mzua pembe.

The one who buried the ivory, brings it to light.

(Refers to traders having too much ivory and being unable to carry all to the coast, buried some in secret for the next caravan.)

Unamlaumu mwewe, kipanga yuwesha kuku.

You are blaming the hawk, while the falcon is killing the chickens.

You blame the small man.

Jungu kuu halikosi ukoko.

A big cooking pot is not without burned rice.

In big government some things go wrong.

Mlenga jiwe kundini hajui limpigaye.

He who throws a stone into a crowd does not know who will hit.

Mtama ukinwaika huonekana punje.

If you spill millet a grain will be seen.

Unnoticed things become visible.

Mwenzako akinyolewa wewe tia maji.

*When your companion is being shaved, put water on your head.
When your neighbor's house is on fire, get ready to save yours.*

Maji yakinwagika hayazoleki.

If water is spilled it cannot be gathered up.

Angakaanga, tu chini ya gae.

*Whenever he fries something, we are under the frying pan.
Nothing is ever completely secret.*

Fimbo mpya huangua kuukuu.

*A new stick knocks down an old one (which was in the tree all the time).
A new charge brings forth hidden ones.*

Ukimficha jogoo kwenye makacha kuna wakati atawika.

If you hide a rooster in a basket, he will crow sooner or later.

Kamba hukatikia pembamba.

A rope parts where it is thinnest.

Chawa aumae yu upindo wa ndani (or)

Kikulacho ki nguoni mwako.

The louse that bites you is inside your shirt.

Avumaye bahari papa (kumbe wengi wapo).

The one who has the bad reputation in the sea is the shark, but there are many others.

Pilipili usizozila zakuwashiani?

*Why should the hot peppers you have not eaten burn you?
If you have no secrets what have you to fear?*

Ulichokiacha pwani kakingoje ufuoni.

What you have left at the shore, wait for it on the beach.

Cover-Up

La kuvunda halina ubani.

There is no incense for something rotting.

Usiongeze njugu maganda.

*Do not add shells to the peanuts.
Do not make things bigger than they are.*

Ndovu akitamba ni masika.

*When the elephant goes abroad, it is the hot season.
The elephant emigrates to survive, the politician to dist
attention.*

Avuaye nguo huchatama.

He who is naked squats low.

Jino la pembe si dawa ya pengo.

*An ivory tooth is not a cure for a gap.
Investigators are looking for the original documents.*

Sahani iliyofunika, kilichomo kimestirika.

When a plate is covered, its contents are hidden.

Mfa maji hukamata maji.

A drowning person catches at water.

Chungu kimevuja nyama, maji yasee.

*The pot has leaked the meat; the gravy is left over.
The explanation given is entirely impossible.*

Uji ukiwa moto haupozwi na ulimi.

Hot porridge is not cooled with the tongue.

Verdict

Kila muacha samboye huenda ali mwanamaji.

*Everyone who leaves his own vessel, leaves as a common
sailor.*

Kupanda mchongoma, kushuka ndio ngoma.

After climbing a thorn tree, coming down is a dance.

Udugu wa nazi hukutania chunguni.

*The brotherhood of coconuts meets in a cooking pot.
Used of evil doers who receive the same punishment.*

Ulivyoligema utalinywa.

*As you tap the palm wine, so will you have to drink it.
Every one will sleep as he makes his own bed.*

Vyako, vyako na wenzio; vikikupata ni vyako pekee.

*The good that befalls you is yours and your friends'; the ev
that befalls you is just your own.*

Kosa moja haliachi mke.

One fault does not warrant the divorce of a wife.

Mchuma janga hula na wakwao.

He who earns calamity, eats it with his family.

Aftermath

Pembe la ng'ombe likivunjika halioti tena.

A broken cow horn does not grow again.

Mavi ya kale hayanuki.

Old droppings do not stink.

Mtupa jongoo hutupa na mti wake.

He who throws away a millipede, throws away the stick (with which he picked it up).

A total break away from mischief.

Kitanda usichokilala hujui kunguni wake.

You do not know the bugs of a bed you did not sleep in.

Kufa kwa mdomo mate hutawanyika.

When the mouth dies, the saliva is scattered.

When the chief is brought down, his dependents break up.

Majuto ni mjukuu, mwishowe huja nyuma.

Remorse is like a grandchild, it comes some considerable time after the event.

Mla nawe hafi nawe, ila mzaliwa nawe.

He who eats with you will not die for you, but your family will. Your family will stick with you, not those you did favors to.

Yaliyopita si ndwele, tugange yaliyomo na yajayo.

That which has passed away is no longer sickness; let us cure that which is here and that is yet to come.

* * * * *

Albert Scheven lived in Tanzania from 1939 to 1971 and is now an Instructor of Swahili, Dept. of Linguistics, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Politics in Swahili proverbs is an offshoot of a major book-length compilation of Swahili proverbs and sayings being prepared for publication.