

Cutting with Words: Kick out Corruption with Swahili Proverbs

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ABSTRACT

Corruption is a thorny issue that has (and still) is being discussed by the people and features prominently in social media: not a single day passes without it being mentioned either openly or in secrecy. In Kenya and in other African countries in general, corruption has become a real menace to the citizens. It has brought social-political havoc and economic chaos to the country. A day hardly passes without it having a place in peoples' discussions. Therefore, it is an issue that needs to be urgently addressed. The question that lingers is: how can we address corruption issues so that people view it as a national disaster? People need to be educated and awakened about the need to wipe it out in our society by invoking the 'cutting words' of proverbs. This will engage people in an open and fruitful discussion with an aim of arriving at an agreed stand on the issue of corruption. In addition, an enabling environment has to be created where people are encouraged to voluntarily give their suggestions and views without fear so that the root cause of corruption can be unearthed, and the way forward found. This calls for individual and collective discussion using popular statements, and this is where proverbs come in handy. Though, in Kenya (like other East Africa countries) there are diverse ethnic groupings but as a community the region has a shared vision and philosophy in use of the available proverbs that are embedded in Kiswahili language. These contextual and popular statements have been in use informally as custodian and an expression of people's culture. They can, therefore, be invoked and made use of when an issue that endangers the fabric of unity and their well-being as a people arise. This article proposes that, Swahili proverbs as culturally accepted statements when used appropriately, can give a broad picture of the various causes and manifestations of corruption in Kenyan situation. It is on the basis of this that the root cause will be laid bare and citizens will not only be widely enlightened on how corruption is manifested but also on how to be alert (without use of force) so as to curb the menace of this magnitude at individual and collective level.

Key Words: *Corruption, Kiswahili Proverbs, Kenya, Enabling environment*

INTRODUCTION

There are many definitions of the term corruption. In this article, the term corruption is used to refer to the bane of all systems and the decay of efficiency. Public and private systems are supposed to run smoothly and efficiently in a society that has not been encroached by corruption. However, cases of bribery and corruption affect these systems upsetting their day-to-day running. For example, a corrupt public servant will want to be bribed so as to offer services that they are mandated to offer free of charge. Such behaviour will affect the people coming to seek services in such an office and the efficiency of the whole system. When corruption sets in, deserving people are robbed of what is rightfully theirs and undeserving people receive what they ought not to receive. Contracts and tenders are given out unprocedurally to the wrong people/companies at the benefit of a few individuals. The public loses a lot of money and get very poor-quality services. According to Ngarumu (2016), many Kenyans continue to languish in poverty due to corruption that has invaded every sector in the country.

Types of Corruption

There are various ways that we can use to classify corruption. Depending on its magnitude, nature and impacts, the following types of corruption are recognized:

1. *Petty corruption* - it is a situation whereby servants who are poorly paid demand money from the members of the public to render their services. Though the issue of poor remuneration is a true cause for this type of corruption, quite a substantive group of such civil servants engage in this type of corruption due to greed.
2. *Grand corruption* - This is a type of corruption where high level public officials and politicians make decisions involving large public contracts or projects financed by tax payers money and external donors. Motivated by personal greed, money is diverted to individual or political parties' coffers.
3. *Episodic* - This is a type of corruption that occurs in a community where honest behaviour is the norm and corrupt and the dishonest public servant is disciplined when detected.
4. *Systemic* - in this type of corruption, channels of malfeasance extend upwards from the bribe collection points and systems depend on corruption for their survival. In the Kenyan context, corruption practices that are rampant are: petty corruption and Grand corruption where high ranking public officials make public purchases on inflated prices, public benefits are handed out to people who are not entitled, fictitious companies are paid for contracts that were never executed among others.

Corruption can also be grouped into two major categories depending on how it is purported to occur. These include: corruption that happens willingly (this is where a person gives a bribe willingly) and extortion. Extortion can also be called forced corruption whereby members of the public are forced to pay bribes for services that they have a legal right to. These two types of corruption are also very common in Kenya. Extortion is especially common in the police service. A good example is when a group of General Service Unit (GSU) extorted money from villagers in Shibale village Kakamega County in the name of looking for stolen firearms (*The Standard Digital*, 26th July, 2016).

Corruption has a very long history in the Kenyan context. Since the colonial times and later when Africans took over leadership positions after independence, corruption has continued to be a thorny issue in Kenya. It gained a foothold under the Government of Mzee Jomo Kenyatta and gained momentum by successive governments. Transparency International Index of 2009 shows that Kenya ranked lower than its neighbours in terms of transparency. Corruption Perception Index (CPI), an instrument ranking countries according to perceptions of corruption in the public sector, found Kenya to be in the top 30 of the most corrupt countries. Later on, according to Transparency International Kenya (2012), Kenya scored 27 out of 100 on a scale where 0 is the most corrupt and 100 is the least corrupt in the corruption perception index. The Global Corruption Barometer 2013 also shows that over 61% of Kenyans think that corruption is a serious problem in Kenya. This situation has not improved much. Kenya's position in the Corruption Perception Index has continued to deteriorate over the years. In the last ranking done by Transparency International Kenya (2016), Kenya moved from position 135 to 146 out of the 176 countries ranked. Though it was highly anticipated that the promulgation of the new Constitution in 2010 would help in the fight against corruption in Kenya, nothing much has been achieved so far (D'Arcy & Cornell, 2016).

The promulgation of the new Constitution led to the establishment of the Ethics and Anti-Corruption Commission (EACC). However, even with the commission in place, corruption practices have continued to increase in the public sector. In fact, the Government has had to suspend a number of Cabinet Secretaries due to corruption allegations (Ongiri, 2015). On the other hand, The Kenya National Human Rights Commission (KNHRC) and other non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that are charged with the mandate of eradicating this vice have not achieved much. Kenyan Citizens rights continue to be violated through corruption. This leaves us with the question, how can the war against corruption be won in Kenya? The National Ethics and Corruption Survey (2015) report, highlight two major causes of corruption in

Kenya: Greed at 62.6% and Poor Remuneration at 13%. This indicates that majority of Kenyans engage in corruption due to greed. This is especially so with grand corruption that involves high ranking officials in the public sector. Many civil servants and politicians who are involved in stealing public money do so due to greed.

Corruption in Kenya has several detrimental impacts to the nation and the people of Kenya. National Ethics and Corruption Survey (2015) report indicates that Kenyans feel that corruption leads to: Poverty (34.8%), Under development (26.3%), Poor service delivery (6.2%), Moral decay (5.3%), Inflation (4.4%) and Inequality (4.1%). These are just examples of the many negative impacts that emanates from corruption. Thus, it is the duty of every Kenyan to get rid of this menace that has continued to destroy our country for so many years.

All over the world, several methods of preventing and curbing corruption have been proposed. In Kenya, the EACC and KNHRC are some of the agencies that help in the fight against corruption. The EACC, for example fights corruption through various ways: advocating for establishment of Integrity Clubs in primary and secondary schools in Kenya, as well as the EACC holding public forums to sensitize the citizens on corruption, its effects and how to fight it. These Anti-corruption groups also spread materials on integrity across Kenya. National Ethics and Corruption Survey (2015) report on the various suggestions on how EACC can improve the circulation of IEC materials to Kenyans, shows that 52.2% of the respondents suggested that EACC should distribute the materials to all the areas in the country, 36.6% suggested that the materials should be in various languages, 21.3% suggested that materials should be increased to reach all Kenyans while 19.7% suggested that EACC should hold public sensitization meetings across the country. It is in view of this, that this article suggests the use of Kiswahili proverbs as a tool that can be used in these materials to lay bare the cause, manifestations and ways of curbing corruption in Kenya. Kiswahili being the national language in Kenya is widely understood and known by many Kenyans and thus can help in spreading the Anti-corruption message in the whole of Kenya at a lower cost.

Transparency International (Kenya) (2009) report , in looking at the various obstacles that the EACC and KNHRC encounter in their endeavour to fight corruption in Kenya, listed language and the approach used by the two movements as some of the obstacles that derail the progress on the war against corruption. In connection to this, the report suggests awareness creation as one of the tools that can be used to ensure public support and hence increasing reports on corruption and unethical conduct. Moreover, awareness creation will contribute towards culture change.

In view of the above, Kiswahili language and Kiswahili proverbs which are culturally acceptable statements can be used to create awareness on the causes of corruption, its manifestations and prevention measures. It is against this background that this article seeks to answer this question, how can Kiswahili proverbs be used to accelerate the fight against corruption in Kenya?

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, the article expounds on how Kiswahili proverbs can be used to sensitize the public on the causes of corruption, its manifestations and the remedy. The section is sub-divided into two parts: the causes and manifestations of corruption and the measures that can be employed to deal will corruption in Kenya as seen in Kiswahili proverbs.

Causes and Manifestations of Corruption

A closer analysis of Kiswahili proverbs would help us to come up with the following causes and manifestations of corruption in Kenya. First, corruption practices emanate from greed and selfishness. There are many Kiswahili proverbs that support this view. It is important to point out that these proverbs were meant to warn against these vices but due to the spread of corruption culture and moral disintegration in Kenya, these proverbs are nowadays used to promote the culture of corruption. They are: *Kila mwamba ngoma huvutia upande wake* (every person will do things that are beneficial to them). This proverb means that human beings like to do things that benefit themselves first before thinking about others and was used to warn

everyone who was perceived to possess such behaviour. Another proverb that has the same meaning as this is, *mtu huziba paa lake* (everyone repairs his/her own roof). As already stated in this article, according to the National Ethics and Corruption Survey report of 2015, majority of Kenyans view corruption as emanating from personal greed and selfishness as opposed to other causes. Many mega corruption scandals witnessed in Kenya starting with Goldenberg, Anglo leasing and the National Youth Service (NYS) are just a few examples of corruption emanating from greed and selfishness.

Another cause of corruption in Kenya is nepotism and ethnicity. The following Kiswahili proverbs can be used to support this view: *Damu ni mzito kuliko maji* (blood is thicker than water) and *Ndugu chungu jirani mkungu* (you should help your kin more than you would a neighbour). These two proverbs were meant to encourage kinsmen to be ready to assist each other but their meaning has been blown out of context as they are nowadays used to encourage nepotism especially in the public sector. Statistics in the public sector have revealed how the county governments perpetuate corruption in the counties by dishing out employment positions to friends and family members totally disregarding academic qualifications, skills and expertise.

Another proverb that is closely related to these two is, *Mtu hauzi kabila lake* (it is wrong to betray your own tribe). Kenyans have disregarded the intended meaning of this proverb and use it to propagate ethnicity. It is scary to see how public positions have been given out to individuals from particular ethnic groups in total disregard of gender and regional balancing in Kenya. Recent statistics have shown how employment procedures in the national government favoured only the six major ethnic groups in Kenya at the expense of all other ethnic groups. In the county governments, majority of the counties have not complied with the one third gender and regional balancing rule in dishing out employment positions. In fact, some of the counties have over 80% of its staff from one ethnic group. The same scenario replicates itself in the majority of the parastatals and state-owned firms. The negative ethnicity menace is so severe as was witnessed in 2016 when senior government officials from Uasin-Gishu county mobilized ordinary citizens in demonstrating against the appointment of a university Vice-Chancellor in the area on the basis of tribe (Ollinga, 2016). If not checked, this trend can among other things negatively affect the economic growth of the country and increase poverty as poor leadership leads to collapse of these firms that are crucial for economic survival of many Kenyans.

Corruption practices are also as a result of conmanship or fraud. Two Kiswahili proverbs that support this view are: *Chendacho kwa mganga hakirudi* (literally translated as, token given to the diviner as payment is never asked back) and *Chendacho mavani hakina marejeo* (that which goes to the grave never comes back). Diviners/ medicine men and women were known to be crafty in their work. Sometimes they give services whose benefit cannot be quantified. However, those who seek services from them cannot ask for their money back whether the services they were seeking work or not; it is their loss. The proverbs were used to warn against entrusting an evil person with your belongings. It is common in Kenya to see, senior public officials, contractors, leaders and even law firms that perpetuate this kind of corruption practices. Conmanship is a common occurrence in the Kenyan streets and thousands of Kenyans lose money to dubious companies and agencies. The most recent is the emergence of criminal activities that are done through technology.

Soliciting of incentives so as to offer services that one is constitutionally mandated to offer is another form of corruption in Kenya. Kiswahili Proverb, *mkono mtupu haulambwi* (literally translated as you cannot lick an empty fist) was meant to encourage people to put some extra effort even as they wait to be assisted by family and friends. The meaning and use of this proverb has been changed to encourage acts of corruption. It is common to see public servants soliciting for incentives from poor Kenyans so as to offer services that they are employed to offer.

Weak leadership is another cause of corruption culture in Kenya. Let us consider this Kiswahili proverb, *Mti ukifa shinale natanzuze hunyauka* (when the stem of a tree dries up, the branches withers and dries up too). Corruption in Kenya has reached alarming rates because post-independence successive governments have largely been unable to take decisive measures that would totally ward off this menace. The fight against corruption has become an election campaign tool but immediately the leaders take the helm of leadership, nothing much is achieved. There are also cases of fear and lawlessness among many Kenyans. In some ways,

these have also contributed to an increase in corruption culture in Kenya. Corruption is not only seen among top government officials, it has spread even to the grass root levels where ordinary poor Kenyans are engaged in corrupt practices. *Maskini hana miiko /Mwenye njaa hana miiko* (a poor/hungry person can do anything; lawful or unlawful). This proverb was meant to encourage the poor to do everything they can to make ends meet but in the recent past, it has been given a new meaning. Kenyans steal or extort money from each other while blaming poverty or unemployment for their behaviour. On the other hand, corrupt cases go unreported due to fear. *Mwenye nguvu mpishe* (might is right). Many Kenyans are afraid of the highly placed and mighty people in the society. This is especially so because the judicial system is also affected by this menace. There are hundreds of pending corruption cases in the courts that are never determined. This makes many Kenyans believe that the Kenyan law is meant to net the poor while safeguarding the interests of the rich and mighty in the society. Thus, when their money is stolen through corruption, many poor Kenyans remain silent.

These among others are some of the Kiswahili proverbs that show the root cause of corruption in Kenyan society and the way corruption manifests itself. The article intends to answer the question, what are some of the preventive measures that can be taken to rid our society off this menace? We will now look at what the Kiswahili proverbs say concerning this.

Preventive Measures

Langseth (1999) contends that the fight against corruption should be an all-inclusive strategy. He further asserts that the wider implications of broad participation are more promising as a means of preventing corruption. The citizens should be given teeth, broader consensus and workable social contracts be generated upon which to base reform and development priorities and programmes. This type of empowerment combined with other practical tools constitutes best practice in preventing corruption. Kiswahili proverbs can be used to empower Kenyans on how to deal with corruption in the country.

The fight against corruption should start at home by inculcating the right values to the young. Parents have a duty to make sure that they teach their children the right values including honesty, accountability and integrity. *Samaki mkunje angali mbichi* (let's build our children character from a tender age). Unfortunately, the Kenyan education system has been encouraging cheating and negative competition among children due to its inclination on examinations. It is, therefore, the role of all stakeholders in the education system to amend these anomalies as soon as possible to safeguard the character of Kenyan children.

As a society, we have to join hands together if we are to succeed in this fight. The fight against corruption is a social/collective responsibility for all Kenyans. *Figa moja haliinjiki chungu/ Umoja ni nguvu utengano ni udhaifu* (unity is strength). The time for Kenyans to wait for their leaders to fight corruption is over. Corruption is not a game of the rich and the mighty, the poor also nurtures it through giving of bribes. It is common to see poor people looking for money including borrowing so that they can bribe their way into getting public/private jobs that in majority of cases ends up in a scam.

Assertiveness is very essential in this fight. An assertive person is not swayed by others. There are many Kenyans who engage in corruption because others are doing it. *Samaki mfu hufuata mkondo, samaki hai huenda* (a rotten person does what others are doing, but a person of integrity is independent-minded). The war against corruption in Kenya will be won when Kenyans will realize that change starts with individuals. If all Kenyans can shun corruption in their small areas of operation, over time the fight against corruption shall be won.

Persistence is another weapon that we can employ in this fight. In many circumstances people tend to give up the fight against corruption when there seems to be no light at the end of the tunnel. *Tumaini hadi mwisho* (hope forever) and *mtenda jambo asisheni kama asotenda* (if you set out to do something and you do not complete it, you are likened to one who never started). These two proverbs are encouraging Kenyans to persist and never give up the fight against corruption. To the leaders too, there is need to carry out thorough and conclusive investigations on all corruption cases. The many inconclusive corruption cases in Kenyan courts are a major deterrent to the war against graft. They point a picture of a government that is not ready

to eradicate corruption in the society. The questions that many Kenyans ask themselves are: Is there any mega corruption scandal that has ever been unravelled in the history of Kenya? Have we ever seen any senior government personnel prosecuted and jailed due to corruption? Until when will the government continue to be lenient to people who commit economic crimes in Kenya? When will these criminals be treated like other criminals and be punished?

Dua ya kuku haimpati mwewe (the cry of a weak person will never end his/her misery). Kenyans should realize that they should not plead with corrupt individuals any more. It doesn't matter their political affiliation, power and influence. A corrupt leader is a criminal who must be opposed and rejected by all Kenyans. Kenyans should elect morally upright individuals in position of leadership during general elections. If Kenyans stopped voting leaders along ethnic lines and political party affiliation, then it is at that point that we can conclude that the fight against graft has taken root in Kenya.

Corruption in Kenya is real and must be dealt with as a matter of urgency. *Penye moshi pana moto / litemwalo lipo na kama halipo laja* (translated as, where there is smoke there is fire). In most cases when corruption allegations are made, the affected people/parties deny the allegations. It is also common to see ordinary Kenyans perpetuating that the corrupt individuals are innocent and that the allegations are meant to tarnish the image of certain communities/political parties. A good example is the National Youth Service scandal where over 900 million shillings were losty (Kegoro, 2016).

Mtenda mema na malipo nihapa duniani (you will reap what you sow). In the mentioned scandal, the efforts of the Cabinet Secretary to exonerate herself from blame did not bear much fruits. Though she had branded herself a whistle blower, the investigating team found that she had played crucial role in abetting the graft in her ministry. This led to her stepping aside to allow investigations. Since the year 2013, a number of Cabinet Secretaries, Principal Secretaries and other prominent officials have been forced to step aside on allegations of graft. These cases are pending in courts and it is the hope of many that justice will prevail for all Kenyans.

Hauchi hauchi unakucha / ujanja wa nyani huishia jangwani / siku ya nyani kufa miti yote huteleza (there is an end to everything). As a country we have not lost hope on the war against corruption. The appointment of the retired Archbishop of the Anglican Church to head the EACC, the formation of committees like the Parliamentary Select Committee and the Police Oversight Committee, the reformed judicial system and the new Constitution are some of the positive steps taken by the Government to boost the war against corruption. Corrupt individuals/institutions could have escaped punishment in the past, but this does not mean that the situation will be like this forever. *Ndege aliyepuka mtego leo atanaswa kesho / ndege mjanja hunaswa kwa tundu bovu* (a crafty person cannot go for long before he/she is caught). A day will come when all that is done in darkness will be brought to light. *Njia ya mwongo ni fupi* (dishonesty is short lived). A person can manage to lie to people, but he/she cannot lie to all the people all the time. Mwithiga (2016a) supports this view by purporting that corrupt individuals' days are numbered.

Sheria ni msumeno yakata mbele na nyuma (the law is impartial). The Kenyan law applies to all Kenyans in equal measure. It does not matter your political inclination, tribe, status, wealth, gender, race or age. The problem that this country has been experiencing for many years is the problem of selective implementation of the law. This led to emergence of a group of people who thought that they were above the law or the untouchables. These are the people who stole public funds and used the same funds to bribe corrupt magistrates to have their cases acquitted. *Mtuni utu si kitu* (what makes us humans is our humanity) and *fedha ni fedheha* (money brings disgrace). It is important for us Kenyans to guard our humanity and avoid greed of money and wealth. *Shauku ni kathiri huondoa ubasiri* (greed erodes wisdom). When we allow ourselves to be driven by greed it incapacitates our ability to reason. When this happens, we tend to do things that will make us regret in future, *Mtaka*

vingi kwa pupa hana mwisho mwema. This is what many Kenyans have done. They want to become rich very fast and at the cheapest cost. This is the reason why cases of corruption have escalated at very alarming rates in the recent past.

Mvunja kwao haongo idaimani bombwe bombwe (a person that destroys his/her country will never be successful). It is good for all Kenyans to be patriotic enough and defend their country from corrupt individuals. This is because corruption is a catastrophe that is threatening to ruin the destiny of this country. It should be declared a national disaster, where all Kenyans will be involved in eradicating it completely. According to Mwithiga (2016b), the best way to do this is by electing leaders of integrity.

CONCLUSION

Kenya continues to sink deeper and deeper in corruption for many years. Transparency International Kenya reports shows that the country is far from winning the war against graft. The EACC and the KNHRC, the two bodies that are charged with the responsibility of fighting corruption in Kenya encounter various obstacles in the execution of their duties. One of the obstacles they encounter is proper language to use in creating awareness among Kenyans. This article proposes the use of Kiswahili proverbs as a means through which the two bodies can use to create awareness among Kenyans on the causes/manifestations of corruption and prevention measures that can be undertaken. From the analysis of Kiswahili Proverbs, it is clear that corruption is caused by greed and selfishness, nepotism, ethnicity, weak leadership, fear, lawlessness and fraud, among others. It also manifests itself in various vices.

Kenyans must come together in the fight against corruption. They should set aside their political, social, cultural, tribal and religious differences as corruption affects all of us in the same way. The onslaught against corruption should start at home where Kenyan parents are called upon to inculcate good morals on their children. They should live exemplary lives so as to act as good role models to the young generation. They can achieve this by being assertive and resisting any attempts to lure them into corruption. It is also their duty to speak out against corruption that is perpetuated by their leaders in the society. Most importantly, it is their duty to elect leaders of integrity who are free of corruption history. They should not allow themselves to be bribed into electing a corrupt leader since one term of an incompetent and corrupt government can totally ruin the destiny of a country. The damage that can be done by such a government is irrevocable.

The EACC and KNHRC with the support of the current government must take decisive actions that will end corruption in Kenya. They must openly condemn acts of corruption witnessed in the country. Cases of corruption should be thoroughly investigated and concluded. Parliament should come up with hefty fines and jail terms that will help in this fight. Perpetuators of corruption should face the law just like other ordinary Kenyans in spite of their political or social status in the society. The corruption net, should not only grasp the small fish but big fishes as well. Kenyans are longing for days when they will see corrupt individuals behind bars and corruption proceeds confiscated and returned to the rightful owners. Corruption must end in Kenya.

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