The Power of the Spoken Word in the Quest for Peace

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Abstract
Peace or the existence of a peaceful state is perhaps what may be said to represent the ideal human condition, which every community either aspires for or ought to aspire for. The constant quest for peace is easily demonstrated by the way some people seem to engage peace as daily vocabulary. The Luhya of Western Kenya, for example, employ the word "mirembe", meaning, peace as their day to day greeting, to which the saluted responds, "mirembe muno/mingi" meaning, more peace or much peace. Chinua Achebe in <u>Things Fall Apart</u>, foregrounds a similar preoccupation with peace among the Igbo of Nigeria. Indeed the phrase, "I bring peace" is a common entry greeting among many communities. Even Jesus Christ in His teachings often called: "peace be with you" (John 20:19); "Peace to you" (John 20:21, 20:26), all perhaps signifying the importance of peace. St. James Bible version invokes the word 'peace' four hundred and twenty-five times. Perhaps nothing could be more reassuring than the promise of peace as expressed through the spoken word.

However, preoccupied about peace as all of us may be, peace between communities has often been elusive. This paper argues that this is perhaps because people have not learnt to appreciate the power of words in facilitating peace – of course the peace that comes through the power of words is that of persuasion. Instead people seek peace through coercion. Peace through coercion operates on the principle of subjugation: peace prevails because the opposing group has been subdued into submission. But as Veerabhadrappa (2007) observes, this type of peace does not last, for the subjugated continue to nurse bitterness and hatred and are bound to explode any time. Peace through persuasion involves dialogue, logic and reason, often attained through round table talks. This type of peace is more dependable, thereby, centring words/dialogue in peace building. One perhaps begins to appreciate why the Kenya National Cohesion and Integration Commission (NCIC) takes so much interest in people's utterances. This paper analyses some of the epithets, utterances, statements and speeches, interrogating their potential to fuel or diffuse tension, thereby affecting peace.

Key words: peace, word of mouth/dialogue, hate speech, fueling/diffusing tension, politics, ethnocentrism, exclusionism.

Introduction

Mbaro (2010:1), introduces his book on peace as follows: "Peace is a great desire that is deeply rooted in the human heart. It is a craving in humanity and a lifetime quest that makes the heart and the entire humanity restless till it finds it." Mbaro further points out that: "We are in a world where we all want peace, and we all love peace, but the question will always be 'Are we prepared to work for it?'" This is a question that is greatly relevant the world over. The world appears to be in strife in every corner. In Africa alone, for example, one could list tens of countries that are not at peace, among them Somalia, Ethiopia, South Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, Central African Republic, Nigeria, just to name but a few. Other countries that have experienced serious violations of peaceful coexistence, not so long ago, now weaning out, or apparently weaned out include the Sudan, Uganda, South Africa, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Rwanda, Chad, Libya, again to name but a few. Meanwhile, there are those countries which on the surface appear peaceful but are potentially explosive – and have from time to time exploded – like Kenya, which this paper has used as a case study to how peace may sometimes be undermined.

Peace in Kenya has sometimes appeared elusive, with the people experiencing frequent conflicts that often result in physical clashes that lead to loss of lives and property. Apparently, the more serious, devastating and widespread conflicts occur towards, during and soon after the national general elections. While these conflicts have borne terms such as 'tribal clashes'; land clashes; cattle rustling; banditry; among others – which terms often make one want to dismiss the clashes as mere acts of violence or criminality, a deeper view begins to suggest that the conflicts go beyond this. I am tempted to argue that perhaps the conflicts are 'ethno-political', meaning that they are ethnically instigated but politically sponsored.

The reason to want to link the conflicts to politics is that they appear more greatly accentuated during the high seasons of political activity (especially around election time) as witnessed in the heat of the general elections of 1988, 1992, 1997, 2002, with the climax experienced in 2007 when close to two thousand people lost their lives and upwards of a million displaced – those that came to be known as IDPs (Internally Displaced Persons), whose existence still haunts the country to date. The situation recurred in the 2017 general elections, but to a lesser magnitude compared to 2007. Meanwhile, the ethnic angle in the conflicts issues from the fact of between whom they occur. One vividly recalls the conflicts that have at one time or another occurred between: the Bukusu and the Sabaot of Mt. Elgon; the Tiriki and Maragoli versus the Nandi; the Kisii versus the Maasai; the Maasai versus the Kipsigis; the Luo versus the Nandi; the Maasai versus the Kikuyu; the Kalenjin groups versus the Kikuyu; the Wardei versus the Pokomo; the Pokot versus the Turkana, to name but a few with the worst being recorded in 2007, which was officially recognized as 'post-election violence' and which majorly pitied the Kikuyu against other groups such as the Kalenjin, the Luo, the Luhya and the Kisii, among others.

This paper acknowledges that sporadic conflicts have sometimes occurred which have been attributed to land disputes, cattle rustling and to a lesser extent, religious rivalry (as happened at the

Coastal area and elsewhere, leading to the burning down of churches and mosques), but the greatest culprit can debatably be said to be politics and ethnic rivalry. The paper wants to argue that politics and ethnic belonging being unavoidable as they are, would actually be innocent existences if it were not for utterances and speeches that incite the people against one another. These are mostly through what has come to be popularly referred to in the country as 'hate speech'. However, before the paper engages the possible workings of 'hate speech', it serves to first consider the pertinent settings as it were (ethnic and political), that are seen to provide fertile ground upon which 'hate speech' may easily and willingly flourish.

Ethnic Settings
Kenya as a country is inhabited by forty-two, plus, ethnic groups boasting a diversity of cultures, values, languages and ideologies. A sociologist friend of mine once remarked to the effect that Kenya is notoriously multi-ethnic. Some of the people whom we were with started questioning the sense in which my friend had used the word 'notorious' but the unexpected arrival of our faculty Dean rather cut short the debate as we all rose to shake his hand. We didn't remember to revisit the issue after the Dean left. I, however, remained guessing that what my friend had perhaps meant by 'notoriously multi-ethnic' was partly because of the fact that multi-ethnocentrism in Kenya is often not seen as diversity but rather as difference and incompatibility, such that different communities cannot comfortably share a space. Considered as different and incompatible, the members of one ethnic community begin to view the members of the other ethnic community with suspicion, or as a threat that needs to be countered if not eliminated. The perpetual fear of the other then begins to seek assurance in ethnic solidarity which by its very nature of formation ends up being what one may call 'negative ethnic solidarity', for it is exclusionist kind of solidarity. It is solidarity informed by the principle of 'protecting our own' against 'the others', who for all purposes are assumed to threaten 'our interests'. The driving force of the solidarity is, thus, self preservation and some degree of what this paper will want to conveniently call 'ethnic xenophobia'.

Even though the threat may, in fact be simply imagined or merely psychological, this comes to assume real life proportions through the power of the words that describe the assumed threat. Often, communities develop epithets that describe their presumed enemies. Indeed as Nyasani (2008:17), points out, the opposing sides hold against each other a plethora of derogatory epithets, such as: villainous, lazy, incompetent, barbaric, uncultured, dishonest, warlike, infantile, intellectually backward/retarded, atavistic, immoral, debauched and profligate. Of course the profiling of such negative attributes is often so cleverly embedded in a people's language that it is subconsciously imbibed, thus forming part of a people's psyche. Quite often, therefore, the epithets form the defining perceptions about the said group, whereby interactions with the group becomes dotted with prejudices formed on the basis of these perceptions. For example, the Luhya once used the epithet *Suk* for the Pokot. Among the Luhya *omusuku* is an enemy, whose plural is *abasuku*. The Pokot, who often raided the Luhya for cattle those days, became the Luhya people's *AbaSUKu* – enemies – simply shortened to Suk or Suks. It would, thus, be expected that a Luhya child would grow up knowing who their enemy was. So, such a child – we would assume – only needed reminding for

them to hate the Pokot and to take up arms against them. On the other hand, the Luhya in the past referred to their Teso neighbours as *Orumia* a term that was meant to disparage them. The derogatory term here targeted to present the entire Teso community diminutively, which again – as one would expect – was likely to cultivate bad blood between the two communities.

Often, a community's view of the other would be found in their oral narratives, songs, proverbs and other oral literature genres. Even today, it is easy to know the type of relationship that existed or does exist by listening to how a people's oral performances refer to the other community or communities. In majority cases, the ogre (the most despicable, most hated and most feared character of the traditional folk tales), for example, comes speaking the language of the enemy community. This is because ogre represents the enemy and by assigning him the dialect of the enemy group, it is a way of reminding the listeners of the danger the other group portends. One may dismiss this as verbal propaganda but it is a strong way of communicating opinion, perceptions and prejudices.

Political Settings

Since the re-introduction of multi-party politics in Kenya in 1992, the tendency has been for members of a particular ethnic group to support the party led by one of their own, (Wanyande, 2009). The consequence of this has been a multiplicity of political parties, each party majorly drawing its support from the ethnic group of the party founder or leader. Kenya could, therefore, be said to practice what this paper would want to call 'ethno-politics'. Just to give an illustration, one needs to put into account the distribution of the leading parties in the country. Before the recent merger of twelve political parties to form Jubilee Party, for example, the leading parties in the merger were obviously The National Alliance (TNA), mostly drawing its membership from Mount Kenya region, particularly the Kikuyu; United Republican Party (URP), seen as a party for the Kalenjin; Alliance Party of Kenya (APK aka The BUS pronounced as the MBAS), with membership from Meru; Party of National Unity (PNU) for the Meru, but originally for the Kikuyu; New Ford Kenya – Luhya; among others. Other leading parties are WIPER Democratic Movement, dominated by the Kamba; FORD-People of the Kisii; FORD-Kenya of the Luhya of Bungoma; Amani National Congress for the Luhya of Vihiga and parts of Kakamega; NARC-Kenya, mostly revolving around Kirinyaga; and Orange Democratic Movement (ODM), which claims to be the most nationally spread party, but unable to enlist any significant membership from some major ethnic groups such as the Kikuyu, the Kalenjin, the Kamba, the Ameru, the Embu, among others, but credited for drawing quite substantive following from among the Luo, Luhya, Turkana, Kisii, Miji Kenda, Maasai and parts of North Eastern. This is just to name but a few.

The merger of a number of parties to form one bigger party – Jubilee Party was hailed as a step towards addressing the political fragmentation menace in Kenya. There, however, still remain fears that this is an effort that could end up like mergers before it, which later disintegrated like Forum for the Restoration of Democracy (FORD) of 1992 which later broke into FORD-Kenya and FORD-Asili, then later FORD-People. There was also the KANU/NDP merger that brought together Moi and Raila Odinga in 1998, breaking up before the elections of 2002. In the run up to

the very 2002 elections, National Rainbow Coalition (NARC), brought together thirteen political parties of which four were major parties: Democratic Party (DP), Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), Social Democratic Party (SDP) and FORD-Kenya. These were to break up into some of the factions that are still active such as Wiper Democratic Movement – born from the previous ODM-Kenya, PNU, ODM, FORD-Kenya, NARC and NARC-Kenya, among others, with DP and SDP stubbornly staying on as independent parties.

The very intention in merging parties into one major party as Jubilee did has been projected as trying to minimize the tendency of ethnically based political parties. Other formations are now urged to emulate the step by Jubilee, hoping that ethnic affiliations in politics in Kenya may come to an end. However, this effort – I would argue – does not offer much solution to ethno-politics in Kenya. I am not just being cynical. The reason for my doubts is the very formula based on for the merger itself. Taking the case of Jubilee, for instance, the parties dissolved to form Jubilee have dissolved in principle but the hard fact is that the red colour of the new Jubilee Party could simply be a surface or top coat to conceal URP's yellow, TNA's original red, New Ford-Kenya's light-green and so on, meaning that Jubilee Party may just be a block made of smaller separate blocks. The merger might in fact be what one may describe as 'ethnic ganging' up. Why such skepticism? It is because the former members of URP, just as an example, are now members of Jubilee but owing allegiance to Willian Ruto (the Kalenjin kingpin) as their rallying point in the merger; so are the former members of TNA to Uhuru (the Kikuyu kingpin); New Ford-Kenya to Wamalwa (the Luhya kingpin); APK to Murungi (the Meru kingpin); among others.

The foregoing view is informed by some of the events in the run up to the merger. Firstly, the dissolving parties were each allocated the number of delegates to attend the merger. The allocation considered the strength of the party, with two parties: TNA and URP alone taking nearly three quarters of the slots and the remaining ten parties sharing what balanced of the ten thousand delegates in attendance. It is also informative that the kingpins had much say in who was going to best represent the "dying party" as a delegate – of course a very coveted appointment – thereby heightening the degree of allegiance to the party kingpin.

Secondly, the rush to strengthen the members' own standing in the "dying parties", was a pointer to the resilience of the parties even in the face of dissolution. The continued life of the "dying parties" was kind of confirmed by Madam Anne Waiguru (eying the Kirinyaga gubernatorial seat). When asked why she was joining TNA, less than a week to its dissolution, she answered saying: "I don't want to belong to the new party as a party-less member. I should have a strong party on which I can negotiate my space in the new party." Perhaps it could be a misinterpretation on my part, but I thought this meant that the individual former parties were to still remain with some life in the new party. And at the risk of being branded 'alarmist', I may project that if, just for example, William Ruto, or any other identified kingpin – including Uhuru Kenyatta – felt short changed in the new party and decided to defect to another party, their entire province (TNA, URP, APK, New Ford-

Kenya, etc.), would also leave the party. This, thus, justifies my postulation that the new formation – Jubilee, is so to say, simply "ethnic ganging up".

Words and Peace

Whether peace can be achieved and maintained in Kenya very much demands the indulgence of the settings above: ethnic and political. This is what this paper terms: 'understanding the context'. However, negotiating peace within the said contexts may often call for a judicious choice of words in communication, remaining conscious of the delicate contexts of operation. A preacher, teacher, politician, leader, radio or TV presenter, disco joker or any other personality granted the opportunity to speak to a Kenyan congregation, will perhaps be called upon to understand and respect these contexts. The word is crucial, while the way it is passed on is critical, Veerabhadrappa (2007). This is perhaps why the Kenya National Cohesion and Integration Commission (NCIC) in its mandate to look into societal cohesion and peaceful coexistence seems to be more concerned with people's utterances, particularly targeting the hitherto referred to as 'hate speech'. 'Hate speech' – it appears – involves the uttering of unsavoury words or statements directly or indirectly directed at another person or group of people with the sole purpose of creating disaffection and/or appearing to incite others to violence or disaffection towards the other person(s). As now established, 'hate speech' and/or incitement, particularly touching on ethnic demography in Kenya can be very sensitive, given the nature of the country's ethnic sensibilities.

Indeed as I think of the question of peace and the way we speak, my mind begins to appreciate why the Luhya start their interactions with the utterance, *Mulembe* (peace). One guesses that this is a way of predisposing peaceful engagement, perhaps just like the way Christians start their businesses with a word of prayer. The Abakhayo, one of the Luhya sub-ethnic communities, has a saying that goes: *Olulimi lulayi lwabisia Busera Ebusubo* (A good tongue made it possible for Busera to safely cross the land of Abasubo). Meanwhile, the Swahili have a simple metaphorical saying: *Ulimi ni upanga* (The tongue is a panga/weapon). In the case of the Abakhayo saying, it seems that Abasubo were hostile people who never spared strangers, but because Busera could talk well, he was able to convince them to spare his life so that he was able to go safely on his way. On the other hand the Swahili saying likens the tongue to a panga/machete that can cut; the tongue like a machete can cut to kill. Both sayings underscore the role of the tongue, in other words, the effect of words.

In Kenya, particularly on the political scene, politicians have been known to use the podium to whip up emotions that target to demonize their opponents while endearing themselves to their audiences. More often than not the unsavoury utterances target the political opponent in the opposing party and because the political parties themselves are, as already noted, majorly ethnic entities, the insult to the opponent easily takes on an ethnic angle. I recall one instance, for example, when a politician targeting an opposing politician derogatively called the latter "uncircumcised, thus, not worth of leadership," the entire community of the insulted leader was up in arms, demanding to be told why they were being insulted.

Due to the limited space of this paper, it would be unnecessary to spend time discussing what everyone can obviously perceive to be hate mongering and inciting. Instead, let me commit some time to discuss what can easily escape people's notice yet it is capable of yielding disastrous outcomes. An expression/utterance that hardly misses from the speeches from Kenyan politicians – and quite unfortunately – including the very high ranking, is "Sisi na wao…" (We and them…). Shall I perhaps call it the "us/them syndrome". It might be difficult for politicians to estimate the magnitude of this statement and its potential for dividing the country. Used by the politicians as they always do, (incidentally the Government side uses it just as much as the opposition, or even more), the statement tends to perpetrate and perpetuate division because of the "othering" effect it carries. It begins to create "our camp, their camp" scenario. Again the chances always are that those being "othered" most likely belong to the opposing political parties (which as I pointed out earlier will likely represent particular ethnic interests and sensibilities). And since the politician(s) being "othered" are perhaps considered as the de facto custodians of their ethnic groups' interests, the "othering" is often taken collectively, where whole ethnic groups consider themselves as being "othered".

The "othering" syndrome tends to exacerbate the ethnic fear and suspicion that already exist, thereby, so to say, arousing and sharpening the instinct of self-preservation. The instinct thus aroused, the people literally begin to see the need to inspect their sheaths to ensure that their swords, knives and daggers are in usable condition. The "othering" is further sealed with the songs that follow such as:

Yote yawezekana	All is still possible
Bila Fulani	Without so and so
Yote yawezekana	All is still possible
Bila Fulani.	Without so and so.

It is quite easy to see the exclusionary potential in such a song. It is also easy to guess that such exclusionary attitude is unhealthy in a country that aspires to move forward as one and/or wants to exist as a nation. I vividly recall the "Baba while you were away" twits that followed the return of a leading politician after an overseas visit, when his followers were reporting what had taken place in the former's absence. One notable one went as: "Baba while you were away, they did ABCD to us". While this may have passed as humour, it could actually be a light hearted manifestation of the "us/them mindset. Indeed one realizes that soon the exclusionism may be leading to something serious as the other groups respond with:

Wakenya msilale	Kenyans don't go to sleep
Lale, lale	Sleep, sleep
Wakenya msilale	Kenyans don't go to sleep Bado
mapambano.	The fight still continues.

Of course the "fight" metaphor is meant to be "struggle" but it eventually comes to be turned into a practical physical fight once the necessary trigger surfaces.

Much debate has gone on concerning what has gone into history as one of Kenya's darkest hours – the 2007 post-election violence. The violence claimed the lives of over one thousand six hundred people, while displacing more than half a million. One significant view given for the people's reactions that turned violent was that the incumbent government had benefited the communities around where the president himself hailed from, at the exclusion of other ethnicities, Tarimo 2009. This view became the rallying point in the speeches by the political campaign parties, thus, creating the feeling that "they ate as we watched". It is common knowledge that some ethnic communities decided to drive out of their regions those who did not belong to the communities of those regions. Of course the exercise invited attendant atrocities and retaliatory attacks that led to some leaders being indicted at the International Criminal Court at The Hague, partly to answer to the charge of incitement through speeches and pronouncements over the radio. Since the leaders could not have been physically present at all the atrocious points, the accusations against them centred on what they allegedly spoke. What the leaders passed on through the spoken word was blamed for the violence, thus affirming the power of the spoken word in building or destroying peace.

Way forward
The Kenya National Cohesion and Integration Commission (NCIC), in its mandate to look into societal cohesion and peaceful coexistence, has several times committed individuals to court to be charged with 'hate speech'. But the charges seem unable to stand for a number of reasons. One, the hate speakers are as it were, mostly politicians. And in a country such as Kenya where politicians are taken as the most important leaders, NCIC sometimes appears helpless where the former are concerned. Two, some of the hate speeches apparently have to be condoned if they are promoting certain interests. For example, the ruling Jubilee party supported the candidature of one parliamentary aspirant (known mostly as a perennial hate speaker), to become the party's member of parliament, in spite of having several court cases of hate speech. My guess here is that the ruling party wanted him because he would be instrumental in the frequent spats with the opposition. The member is reputed for his nerve to throw insults at the opposition in a manner no one else on the government side can. So, he must have been seen as a big asset during verbal altercations and standoffs. Three, often the hate speaker enjoys the protection of his/her ethnic community, who will in fact stand with him/her if touched regardless of his/her faults.

One guesses that in the latter case NCIC backs off for fear of a backlash from the community of the offending leader. In some cases NCIC is not able to prove that what was uttered constituted hate speech, but in other cases, some of the members of NCIC themselves have interests that may come under threat if the hate speaker was punished. In all this, however, one may have nothing to do other than sympathize with NCIC as it fights a vice that appears to be the country's culture. This of course is a culture that has constructed people's careers, as they purport to root for the rights of their ethnic groups, which raises the question: Can ethno-centrism come to an end in Kenya?

While it is not possible to eliminate ethno-centrism (the country is ethnically constituted, anyway), it is possible to work against ethnic exclusionism. It is also possible to deal with the fear, suspicion

and hatred that seem to exist between the different ethnic communities. In the words of Mandela, in *Long Walk to Freedom* (1994:20):

> No one is born hating another person because of the colour of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite.

It really behooves the country's leadership to cultivate a culture of trust between the communities through judicious choice of what to talk to the people. The latter look up to their leaders, so what the leaders say shapes their perceptions of the people from the other ethnic groups. Meanwhile the leaders themselves need to publicly show respect for each other as leaders. While it is expected and acceptable that opposing political groups compete, fanning the ethnic differences that are reflected in the political parties is avoidable. Besides, the politics of self aggrandizement; the politics of '*Who can bwogo me? I am unbwogable*' meaning, (Who can scare me? I am indomitable)*,* shouldn't be the roadmap. The politics of insults towards other citizens may take away the respect for each other that is a mark of political maturity and tolerance. Kenyans have often been treated to talk from political leaders that carries nothing other than insults directed at political opponents. Statements such as: "Pumbavu, mafi ya kuku;" "Mtu wa vitendawili;" "The prince of corruption;" "Hiyo pesa siyo ya baba yako;" among others are all too familiar statements from leaders, directed at their fellow leaders. The truth is, when a leader hates another leader and he/she puts the hatred in the open or makes it the subject of discussion with his/her followers, the latter come to hate that individual just as much. And given the ethnic factor in the Kenyan politics and also the way leaders appear to be viewed as the custodians of specific ethnic interests, intense hatred for an individual could in fact boil down to intense hatred for the individual's ethnic community. One is hardly sure at what point insults to individuals will in fact expand to become collective insults against the individual's ethnic community – sometimes the borderline can be quite hazy.

Conclusion

In conclusion societal cohesion and peaceful coexistence should take precedence over individual political mileage. Leaders need to respect the country's ethnic diversity and appreciate the individual ethnic sensibilities for the sake of national unity. Each should target to literally arm themselves with this '*mulembe*' term that seems to preoccupy the Luhya community such that the word serves as their 'open sesame' to their interactions. Before leaders open their mouths to speak, they should always remember that "Ulimi ni upanga" that can cut down all that the country stands for, including its citizenry. Meanwhile, those in power have to remain sensitive to exclusionary tendencies that make communities other than their own feel "othered". Exclusionary "othering" breeds bitterness and a sense of 'left outness' that tempts violence as the means of trying to get entry into what the people feel is a house for all Kenyans, by right. Otherwise, the paper is a wake up call to the leaders in Kenya, other African countries and indeed other countries the world over, to appreciate that every country has things that make its citizens different, and those differences are always tolerable until someone makes them toxic through simple tools such as words, utterances and statements that incite and arouse animosity.

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