

Chapter 40

Swahili Proverbs

Proverbs are short sayings that generally express words of wisdom or commonly held ideas. Proverbs exist in all spoken languages and originate from oral tradition. In modern times, Swahili proverbs are not only used orally, they are also written on Kanga. Often some proverbs are well known in different languages although variations do occur. Proverbs can be used in a variety of ways. They are used to teach and pass on knowledge to others, entertain and make conversations livelier as well gently point out mistakes and reinforce social behaviour. In addition, the knowledge of proverbs is usually a mark of someone who is familiar with the culture and language. In this chapter, we will introduce some well known Swahili proverbs as well as some proverbs from other languages which have been adopted into the Swahili language. Below are some common proverbs, their literal translations and their implied meaning(s). Of course, the meaning(s) of some proverbs have changed over time while the meaning of others has remained more or less the same.

Akiba haozi.

Savings do not decay.

Savings (usually money) are never a bad thing. It is always good to save for the future.

Akili ni mali.

Intelligence is wealth.

If you use your intelligence, you will acquire wealth. If you have

wealth but do not use your intelligence, your wealth will soon diminish.

Akipenda chongo huita kengeza.

Someone who loves a one-eyed person would call that condition only a squint.

When you love someone, you overlook their faults. This is similar to the proverb “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.”

Aliye kando haangukiwi na mti.

One who stands far away from a tree will not be hurt when the tree falls.

We should stay away from dangerous people and situations to avoid getting hurt.

Amani haipatikani ila kwa ncha ya upanga.

Peace cannot be obtained except by the point of a sword.

It is by being prepared for war that you are most likely to be left in peace. This is similar to the proverb “If you want peace, prepare for war.”

Anayeonja asali huchonga mzinga.

Someone who tastes honey makes a beehive.

One who has experienced success or luxury will strive to acquire more of it through hard work.

Asifuye mvua imemnyea.

One who praises the rain does so because it has rained on him.

One can only talk about what he/she has experienced.

Asiyefunzwa na mamaye, hufunzwa na ulimwengu.

One who is not taught by his/her mother is taught by the world.

If you are not taught at home, then you will learn it the hard way.

Asiyesikia la mkuu huvunjika guu.

One who does not listen to the elderly suffers a broken leg.

If you do not heed the counsel given by elders, you will experience difficulties.

Bandu! Bandu! huisha gogo.

A log can be finished by chopping little pieces.

If you continue to use up your resources little by little, eventually they will be depleted. Or it could be interpreted as if you do the work little by little eventually it will be done.

Bendera hufuata upepo.

The flag follows the direction of the wind.

This is directed towards opportunists who change sides depending on what they will gain.

Cha mlevi huliwa na mgema.

What belongs to the drunkard is eaten by a wine maker.

This proverb implies that addiction will cost you your wealth.

Chema chajiuzwa, kibaya chajitembeza.

A good thing sells itself while a bad thing has to be advertised.

If something is good, it will become well known. However, if something is bad, continuous effort(s) must be made to keep up its reputation.

Dalili ya mvua ni mawingu.

The sign of the rain is clouds.

If one knows where to look, there are always signs to indicate what is coming.

Damu nzito kuliko maji.

Blood is heavier than water.

People tend to favour family rather than people who are not related to them. This is similar to the proverb "Blood is thicker than water."

Dua la kuku halimpati mwewe.

The curse of a hen will have no impact on an eagle.

If less successful people complain about those who are successful, the complaints will not have an impact and will not lead to any change.

Haba na haba hujaza kibaba.

Little by little fills the bucket.

Great things are accomplished by small deeds.

Hapana siri ya watu wawili.

There is no secret between two people.

Once you have shared a secret with another person, it is no longer a secret because chances are that more people will find out.

Haraka haraka haina baraka.

Hurry hurry has no blessings.

If you do things in a hurry, you are likely to make mistakes. This is similar to the proverb “Haste makes waste.”

Hasira hasara.

Anger causes loss.

If you do something when you are angry, you may regret it later.

Kidole kimoja hakivunji chawa.

One finger cannot kill lice.

It is possible to achieve greater success when you have the support of others. This is similar to the proverb “United we stand, divided we fall.”

Kikulacho ki nguoni mwako.

What eats you is in your clothes.

Most of your problems are caused by yourself or someone close to you.

Kipya kinyeme ingawa kidonda.

A new thing attracts even though it is a wound.

New things always attract even though they may have defects.

Kukopa ni arusi kulipa ni matanga.

Borrowing is like a wedding, paying back is like mourning.

Borrowing makes people happy but paying back makes people sad.

Kutoa ni moyo, usiseme utajiri.

Giving depends on the heart don't say that it depends on wealth.

Some people who are wealthy are not willing to help others while some who are poor are willing to help others.

Lisilokuwepo machoni na moyoni halipo.

What is not seen by the eye is not in the heart.

Those that are seen are remembered more than those who are not seen. This is similar to the proverb "Out of sight, out of mind."

Mafahali wawili hawakai zizi moja.

Two bulls cannot reside in the same shed.

If two people with strong personalities have to deal with each other, they will fight.

Maji yakimwagika hayazoleki.

Spilled water cannot be gathered.

It may be too late to salvage something which is already damaged.

This is similar to the proverb "It is no use crying over spilt milk."

Maneno mazuri humtoa nyoka pangoni.

Sweet words can make a snake come out of its cave.

One is likely to convince someone by using sweet words. This is similar to the proverb "You catch more flies with honey than with vinegar."

Mbuzi wa maskini hazai.

A poor man's goat does not reproduce.

Poor people cannot overcome their poverty because you need wealth to generate more wealth.

Mchagua jembe si mkulima.

One who chooses a hoe is not a farmer.

If you are good at your job, then you can use any tool to accomplish your task and you do not have to be selective of which tool you need to get the job done.

Mchelea mwana kulia hulia yeye.

He who is afraid to see a child cry will cry himself.

If you don't discipline your child, they will cause you great sadness.

This is similar to the proverb "Spare the rod, spoil the child."

Mchimba kisima huingia mwenyewe.

The one who digs a well gets himself inside.

If you are planning something with the intention of harming someone, you may be the one who ends up getting hurt instead.

Mgema akisifiwa sana tembo hulitia maji.

If a wine-maker is praised too much, he/she is likely to dilute the wine.

The proverb teaches people not to heap too much praise on people for the work they are doing. They might think too highly of themselves, and end up doing a poor job.

Mjumbe hauwawi.

A messenger is not killed.

It is no use blaming or hurting the one who brings the news. It is the one who caused the problem that should be blamed. This is similar to the proverb "Don't kill the messenger."

Mshika mawili, moja humpokonya.

One who holds two things, one will slip away.

One who is busy with too many things will not finish anything successfully.

Mstahimilivu hula mbivu.

A patient person eats ripe fruits.

Patience is always rewarded.

Mtaka cha uvunguni sharti ainame.

One who wants to get something under the bed must bend.

You must be willing to do what it takes to get what you want.

Mwenye njaa hana miiko.

A hungry person does not have taboos.

When you are in desperate need, you will do desperate things.

Mzigo wa mwenzio ni kanda la usufi.

Your companion's luggage is a load of cotton wool.
The burden is light when it is on another's shoulder.

Nazi mbovu haramu ya nzima.

A rotten coconut is prohibited to the group of coconuts.
One spoilt thing spoils other things around it. This is similar to the proverb "One bad apple spoils the bunch."

Shukrani ya punda ni mateke.

The gratitude of a donkey is kicks.
This is used to warn people to be cautious as there are some people who are selfish and will still treat you badly in return for a favour.

Tamaa mbele, mauti nyuma.

Desire first, death afterwards.
No one ever thinks of the dangers when concentrating on achieving a particular end.

Udugu wa nazi hukutania chunguni.

The brotherhood of coconuts has its meeting in the cooking pot.
This is used for people who do not cooperate until it is too late.

Usipoziba ufa utajenga ukuta.

If you do not repair a crack you will build an entire wall.
Fixing a small problem is easier than fixing a big one. This is similar to the proverb "A stitch in time saves nine."

Usitukane wagama na ulevi ungalipo.

Don't insult wine makers while drinking is still there.
Do not spoil a relationship which you may need later on.

Vita havina macho.

War does not have eyes.
War affects everyone.

Wapiganapo tembo wawili ziумiazo nyasi.

When two elephants fight, it is the grass that gets trampled.
When two powerful forces clash, others around them will be hurt.

Copyright © 2014. UPA. All rights reserved.