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Dane M. Kiambi

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, dane.kiambi@unl.edu

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Kiambi, Dane M., "Ethnic appeal: A self-defense tool for Kenyan politicians" (2012). *Faculty Publications, College of Journalism & Mass Communications*. 104.

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Published in *Public Relations Review* 38 (2012), pp 144–146.

doi 10.1016/j.pubrev.2011.08.019

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Submitted 16 January 2011; revised 16 August 2011; accepted 21 August 2011.

Ethnic appeal: A self-defense tool for Kenyan politicians

Dane Kiambi

Department of Public Relations, College of Mass Communications, Texas Tech University,
Box 43082, Lubbock, TX 79409-3082, USA

Abstract

So far, analyses of apologetic rhetoric strategies as used by individuals or organizations to respond to accusations of wrongdoing have been concentrated in the West. An analysis of political apologia in an African setting – in this case Kenya – reveals that while Kenyan politicians have used denial, victimization, mortification, and counterattacking among other self-defense strategies, one particular strategy emerges as the most commonly used by Kenyan politicians – ethnic appeal.

Keywords: Apologia, Kenya, Politicians, Ethnic appeal, Rhetorical strategies

1. Introduction

The advent of multiparty politics in Kenya in 1992 and the continued opening up of democratic space has led to an increase in the number of whistle blowing incidents against official grand corruption and other malfeasance within and outside government. Prior to the era of multiparty democracy, a would-be whistle blower would either be condemned to detention without trial or even worse, be mysteriously killed by assassins hired by corrupt and powerful individuals keen on protecting their ill-gotten wealth.

As a result of the fledging democratic space, a cross-section of high profile leaders have in the last decade faced a series of accusations of wrongdoing which the Kenyan media does not hesitate to further

investigate. Consider the following headlines: “MP denies he was in city red light area” (*Nation*, 2004, p. 1); “Kiraitu says sorry over rape slur” (*Nation*, 2005, p. 1); “I’ve only one wife and a child, says Kiunjuri” (*Standard*, 2004, p. 1); “Ruto: Why I will not quit the Cabinet” (*Nation*, 2010, p. 1).

In a bid to clear their names of any wrongdoing, individuals faced with the accusations have seized the opportunity to defend themselves and restore their reputations. The accusations and subsequent self-defense strategies make Kenya a perfect example of examining apologia as it is practiced in an African setting. Apologia, a defense of one’s character (Ware & Linkugel, 1973), indicates that the accused will employ a series of rhetorical strategies to defend themselves from accusations of wrongdoing.

While this study examines other rhetorical strategies used by politicians in Kenya, it emphasizes on the most pervasive one – ethnic appeal. A politician using ethnic appeal alleges that those accusing him of wrongdoing are not only after him but also his entire ethnic community.

2. Methodology

To understand the ethnic appeal rhetorical strategy, I conducted a close textual analysis of texts in two Kenyan dailies – the *Nation* and *Standard*. The *Nation* is Kenya’s most influential newspaper. The *Standard*, the second most authoritative newspaper, is the oldest having been founded in 1902. These two newspapers have reporters and correspondents in almost every town in Kenya thus enabling them reach areas visited by politicians.

Texts selected for analysis were lead stories appearing in the two dailies reporting the reaction of politicians to accusations of wrongdoing between 2004 and 2011. This analysis focuses on politicians who have been linked with malfeasance. The texts analyzed here are not an exhaustive study of all cases of wrongdoing by public officials in Kenya; they were selected for analysis because they are some of the most prominent accusations of wrongdoing against Kenya’s political leaders.

3. Findings

When the then-Justice Minister Kiraitu Murungi made an alleged slur against women in 2005, he engaged in mortification, “an admission of wrongdoing and request for forgiveness” (Benoit, 1995, p. 18). Murungi was forced to apologize for his controversial analogy to the effect that persistent calls by the international donors on Kenya to step up fight against official graft were “like raping a woman who is already willing” (BBC, February 11, 2005).

Following weeks of protests from a cross-section of women groups in Kenya, Murungi sought to regain his reputation: “I unreservedly and sincerely apologize to all the women who were offended by the remarks. I withdraw the remarks to the extent to which they referred to rape and willingness and drawing parallel to the anti-corruption war situation” (*Nation*, February 11, 2005).

After apologizing from his official office in the capital city, Nairobi, Murungi retreated to his Meru ethnic community and political backyard – Imenti South constituency – where he continued to express regret for his remarks while appealing to his constituents to stand by him. He was reelected to office in 2007 and appointed minister in the next government.

When the *Nation* newspaper ran a lead story in 2004 accusing two unnamed ministers of picking up prostitutes in a Nairobi red light district with their official limousines, Ministers Mwangi Kiunjuri and Chirau Mwakwere came forward saying the story was indirectly referring to them. They used denial, bolstering, counterattack and victimage to defend themselves. While denying and counterattacking, Kiunjuri said: “The motive of the sensational story was for the defendants to make money and injure my reputation and character. I am seeking damages” (*Standard*, January 27, 2004).

Just like Murungi, Kiunjuri retreated to his Laikipia East constituency, inhabited mostly by members of his Kikuyu ethnic community, where he held a series of meetings alleging that the media story was a creation of his political detractors intent on finishing him politically. He managed to be reelected in 2007. His defamation suit against the *Nation* was dismissed while he was awarded Kshs 5 million (\$64,102) for another suit against Radio Citizen.

On his part, Mwakwere used denial, and bolstering when he said: “Mine is a clean life. Even God knows how I have lived as a civil

servant and I promise to continue being a role model” (*Nation*, October 13, 2004). He played victimage and ethnic appeal when he said: “My family, all the Digos and Kenyans are waiting for those behind the stories to say where they got it from” (*Nation*, October 13, 2004). Digo is his ethnic community.

Like Murungi and Kiunjuri, Mwakwere went back to his Digo community where he on many occasions claimed that the allegations against him had been masterminded by his political enemies with the objective of denying him and members of his ethnic community positions in government. He was reelected to Parliament in 2007 and reappointed to cabinet.

When in 2005 three Kenyan ministers were implicated in one of the biggest financial scandals in Kenyan history, they all engaged in denial, victimage, counterattack and shifting the blame. Those implicated in the Anglo Leasing scandal, as it came to be known, were the then-Internal Security Minister Chris Murungaru, Finance Minister David Mwiraria, and his Justice counterpart, Kiraitu Murungi. Anglo Leasing was the name of a dubious international company that had won a tender to replace Kenya’s passport printing system. It was reported that Anglo Leasing had received millions of dollars from the Kenyan government without offering any services.

As public calls mounted for the three to resign, President Kibaki relieved them of their ministerial responsibilities pending investigations into the scandal. After a series of denials, and shifting the blame to officials in the previous regime, the three retreated to their respective ethnic communities where, for weeks, they appealed to members of their ethnic communities to stand by them. They separately claimed that claims of corruption had been orchestrated by political detractors from other ethnic communities with the intent of denying their communities representation in the government. The president reinstated the three to the cabinet after investigations found that they had no role to play in the alleged scandal.

Ministers Uhuru Kenyatta and William Ruto, accused by the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague of organizing the 2007–2008 post-election violence in which over 1500 Kenyans were killed, engaged in denial, victimage, counterattack and bolstering while responding to the allegations. However, it is their use of ethnic appeal that is most prominent. Jointly, the two criss-crossed Kenyatta’s Central Province that is home to members of his Kikuyu ethnic community

and Rift Valley, home of Ruto's Kalenjin community members claiming that ICC prosecutor Luis Moreno-Ocampo was being used by their political detractors intent on ensuring that a Kikuyu or Kalenjin does not become Kenya's next president after the 2012 election. Kenyatta and Ruto have declared their interest in vying for the presidency in 2012. A prosecution by the ICC in connection with the post-election violence could end their presidential ambitions.

4. Analysis and conclusion

Although the Kenyan politicians used denial, mortification, bolstering, counterattack, victimage, and shifting the blame, a pattern emerged in the choice of the next apologetic strategy. They all took refuge in their respective ethnic communities where they appealed to members of their communities to resist what they (politicians) perceive as persecution of the entire community by their political detractors.

Due to the low literacy levels in Kenya's countryside and the ethnicized nature of Kenya's local and national politics, majority of the public is likely to be convinced that their leader is actually a victim of destructive political machinations emanating from his/her political enemies. Politicians guilty of wrongdoing have even ended up being heroes in their ethnic backyards due to the polarization of Kenyan politics along ethnic lines.

Though playing the ethnic appeal card would seem a strategic tool for use by Kenya's politicians seeking to repair their reputation and get reelected, political observers have warned that such strategies only end up widening the chasm of negative ethnicity among the over 40 communities in Kenya. As Ajulu (2002) warns, politicizing ethnicity as a political strategy in Kenya is "the first step towards warlordism" (p. 266).

This study introduces a previously unexamined apologetic form — ethnic appeal. It seems to suggest that a politician seeking to divert attention from accusations of wrongdoing would successfully do so by claiming to be a victim of persecution by individuals against his ethnic community. However, since this strategy has been shown to be a politically divisive one, it is important that ethnic appeal be used cautiously or avoided all together so as not to widen the existing ethnic suspicions among the over 40 Kenyan communities.

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