

Collectivism, Virtue and Human Rights in the Political Philosophy of Jomo Kenyatta

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Abstract

The political philosophy of Jomo Kenyatta, who is the first President of Kenya and a prominent figure in the Pan-African movement, has been the subject of several academic debates and discourses in the past decades. While Jomo Kenyatta is often remembered for his famous statement, “in the onset of freedom, it is our duty to build a new nation that is strong, united and secure”. His philosophy, therefore, focuses more on freedom and the duty of nation building. Jomo Kenyatta’s thoughts focus heavily on self-determination and the potential of African nations to become fully self-reliant. His concept of self-determination is rooted in the belief in African unity. This makes a connection between his thought and Pan-African movement with its emphasis on collective rather than individual power. This paper presents the path set by Jomo Kenyatta for the achievement of African self-determination, which involves gaining full autonomy economically and politically. The researchers adopted the expository and qualitative methods of research for the understanding and presentation of Kenyatta’s thoughts. The theory of collectivism was adopted as the theoretical framework for the interpretation and understanding of the thoughts of Jomo Kenyatta. The paper shows that the thoughts of Kenyatta, among others, is at the base of the present developments in Pan-Africanism.

Keywords: Jomo Kenyatta, Kenya, Africa, Self-Determination, Freedom

Introduction

In the study of political philosophy, the concern is much more with Western political thought. The curriculum that provides the road-map to teach political philosophy considers classical scholars such as Plato, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Aristotle, John Rawls, etc., as mainstream political philosophers. It is likely that a great number of students and scholars of political philosophy have not heard of scholars like

Julius Nyerere, Leopold Senghor, and Julius Nkrumah, Jomo Kenyatta, Patrice Lumumba, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Obafemi Awolowo, etc., possibly because the discourses that characterize the study of political philosophy has not created a space for African philosophers who major in African political philosophy; thus not ranking them the same with Western political philosophers.

A cursory glance reveals that there are great differences between African political philosophy and Western political philosophy; yet, despite these obvious differences, a major similarity stands out; which is, the ability to rationalize, critique, appraise, analyze and evaluate. The category of philosophers within the parameters of African political philosophy differ only to the extent that they have made several attempts to solve different socio-political problems at different times and space using a different category of understanding peculiar to the African circumstance.

According to Anthony Ikechukwu Kanu, not minding the contention regarding the discipline of African philosophy, “it is studied in many universities in Africa, and has, in fact, moved beyond the shores of Africa, finding its way into the curriculum of many universities in Europe and America, where it is taught by both African and non-African professors”¹. This research goes a step further to discuss the political philosophy of Jomo Kenyatta as an African political philosophy. It would focus on the unique emphasis of his socio-political philosophy, which is the question of self-determination for the people of Africa.

Biography of Jomo Kenyatta

Jomo Kenyatta's original name is Kamau Ngengi. He was born in 1894 in Ichaweri, in the British East Africa now in Kenya. He died in August 22, 1978, in Mombasa, Kenya. He is an African statesman and nationalist, the first Prime Minister (1963–

64) of Kenya and then the first President (1964–78) of independent Kenya². His father served as the chief of a tiny Kikuyu farming community. At around the age of 10, Kamau developed severe jigger infections in his foot. At a recently formed Church of Scotland mission, he underwent successful surgery. It was his first interaction with Europeans.

Fascinated by what he had witnessed while recovering³, Kamau was one of the earliest of the Kikuyu to leave the confines of his own town for the urban attractions of Nairobi. He studied the Bible, English, mathematics, and carpentry, and he paid his tuition by working as a houseboy and cook for a European settler⁴.

In August 1914 he was baptized with the name Johnstone Kamau⁵, and obtained a position as clerk in the Public Works Department. It was at this time that he took on the name Kenyatta. After serving as a High Court interpreter, Kenyatta shifted to serve in a position with the Nairobi Town Council. Around this period, he got married and started a family⁶.

The East Africa Association (EAA), led by a bright young Kikuyu named Harry Thuku, was the first African political protest

¹ Kanu I.A *African Philosophy: An Ontologico-Existential Hermeneutic Approach To Classical and Contemporary Issues* (Jos: Augustinian Publication, 2015) P. XVI

² Assensoh A.B *African Political Leadership: Jomo Kenyatta, Kwame Nkrumah, and Julius K. Nyerere* (USA: Krieger Pub Co, 1998)

³ Wepman D. *Jomo Kenyatta: President of Kenya* (USA: Chelsea House Pub, 1985)

⁴ Kenyatta J. *Facing Mount Kenya: The Trial of the Gikuyu* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976)

⁵ Rowe, J. A.. "Jomo Kenyatta." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, August 18, 2023. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jomo-Kenyatta>.

⁶ Rowe, J. A.. "Jomo Kenyatta." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, August 18, 2023. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jomo-Kenyatta>.

movement in Kenya against a white settler-dominated administration. He was succeeded by Kenyatta, who came on board and recovered Kikuyu territories that were lost to the British. Reservations for aboriginal people were created, and leaseholds of property were restricted to white settlers. Due to government pressure, the EAA was dissolved in 1925, and its members later reorganized as the Kikuyu Central Association (KCA). In 1925, Kenyatta was appointed the Secretary of the KCA, and so resigned from his position as a municipal employee.

In an effort to attract support from all Kikuyu groups, Kenyatta started publishing a monthly newspaper in Kikuyu language in May 1928. The magazine was named *Mwigithania*, which means *He Who Brings Together*. Even though the government tolerated the magazine's benign tone and message of self-improvement, it faced several obstacles, knowing fully well that it was affecting the control of the British in East Africa.

In a powerful letter published in *The Times* of London in March 1930, Kenyatta outlined the five areas of interest of the KCA: land tenure security and the return of lands given to European settlers; better educational opportunities; the repeal of hut taxes on women, which drove some to engage in prostitution; African representation in the Legislative Council; and respect for cultural norms⁷. In the same letter he added that the absence of these precautions will "inevitably

result in a dangerous explosion - the one thing all sane men wish to avoid"⁸.

Kenyatta studied anthropology under Bronislaw Malinowski at the London School of Economics. He did several studies on the way of life of the Kikuyu⁹. After the establishment of Kenya African Union, he was chosen president in June 1947. At this, he returned to Kenya in September 1946¹⁰. While in office a new constitutional amendment made Kenyatta the country's first president. During his tenure, Kenyatta constantly appointed representatives of many ethnic groups to his cabinet, albeit he leaned most heavily on his fellow Kikuyu, to quell any tribal-based resistance. Under his leadership, the country experienced exceptional political stability; however ideological disagreements and ethnic rivalries occasionally led to confrontations within the leadership.

Kenyatta opposed socialist aspirations for the nationalization of property and advocated a philosophy of individual and entrepreneurial initiative¹¹. He firmly favored a free-market economy and welcomed investment from Western and other nations. During his leadership, Kenya's gross national product increased almost by five times. Even though economic expansion benefited a great number of people, it also created huge wealth discrepancies, with a substantial portion of it

⁷Rowe, J. A.. "Jomo Kenyatta." *Encyclopedia Britannica*

⁸ Delf G. *Jomo Kenyatta: Towards Truth about 'The Light of Kenya'* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1961)

⁹ Kenyatta J. *Facing Mount Kenya: The Trial of the Kikuyu*

¹⁰ Friedmann, J. *Jomo Kenyatta* (USA: Wayland Publishers, 1967)

¹¹Rowe, J. A.. "Jomo Kenyatta." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, August 18, 2023. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jomo-Kenyatta>.

going to Kenyatta's family and close friends; this affected the standard of life of the majority of Kenyans¹². His administration embraced a pro-Western foreign policy, and thus is regarded as one of the major pro-British African leaders. He was later imprisoned by British officials, and was succeeded by Daniel Arap Moi. He died in Mombasa in 1978.

The context of Jomo Kenyatta's political philosophy

Even though Jomo Kenyatta does not fall into the class of professional philosophers since he did not study philosophy in the university, it does not detract from the huge contribution that he has made to the philosophical enterprise.

In *An Introduction to African Philosophy* John Chukwuemeka Ekei argues thus:

In presenting African philosophy from academic and professional perspective, we have to bear in mind not only 'the what' of its subject matter namely, the 'African' and his 'world' as a basis of grasping reality as a whole, but also 'the how' of its investigations. Like all philosophies, African philosophy must be rational and critical in its investigations... African philosophy has its primary role the constant quest for critical and reflective evaluations of traditional African beliefs, world views and customs¹³.

Given the utilitarian function of philosophy, Oguejiofor ascribes rationality not only to philosophers who are drawn from the academic sense and professional training but also others outside of this range. This is because, the critique of ideology and the training of the human mind to morality is not solely the prerogative of philosophers¹⁴. This means that one does not need to be an academic philosopher before carrying out these utilitarian functions of philosophy as ascribed to philosophers.

It is indeed in this regard, Jomo Kenyatta can be considered a philosopher in the strict sense of the word; and this is justified on the grounds that the utilitarian functions of philosophy might not necessarily be the sole prerogative of philosophers.

In *What Philosophy Can (not) Do For Africa*, Uchenna Okeja further argues:

...philosophy must not have the monopoly of doing anything it does to be relevant as a field of inquiry. On this account, it seems appropriate to maintain that philosophy is relevant because it offers something to humanity which is the training of the human subject in critical thinking, although it is not the only field of inquiry that can perform this task. On the ebb of this, I think it is important to make a distinction between the 'tasks solely performed by philosophy' and the 'tasks philosophy performs just like other fields of inquiry'. With this distinction in mind, it would be clear

¹²Rowe, J. A.. "Jomo Kenyatta." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, August 18, 2023. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jomo-Kenyatta>.

¹³ Ekei C.J., *An Introduction to African Philosophy* (Lagos: SMAGH, 2014) P. 41

¹⁴ Oguejiofor O.J *Philosophy and the African Predicament* (Ibadan: 2001) P. 135

that one will be doing an injustice to philosophy, if one denies it relevance just because it performs only the second sort of functions¹⁵.

He contends that:

The relevance of philosophy should not be hinged on its possession of exclusive tasks it can superciliously point to. Rather, philosophy should be accorded its due relevance based on the importance of the sorts of contributions it can make to better the lot of humanity, especially the people of Africa. Based on this, I agree with the assertion of Pauline Hountondji that ‘the important thing is not philosophy as such, but critical thinking’. I also concur that, for the African context, “this is the type of thinking we should today develop in our universities and research centers [especially because they are apt in] making us imagine the possible beyond reality and seeing to it that the commonplaces of the present do not become the measure of everything¹⁶.

Philosophers are known on occasions of problems to help solve problems; and Kenyatta is a product of an African condition. Bertrand Russell avers that if, the study of philosophy has any value at all for others than students of philosophy, it must

be only indirectly, through its effects upon the lives of those who study it. The life and works of Jomo Kenyatta has impacted positively on the African.

Every philosopher, according to Joseph Omoregbe, reflects ‘the socio-political situation of its time and place’¹⁷. He holds that:

Socio-political situations generally raise many questions in the minds of people and thus give rise to reflection and philosophizing. Hence, there is always a close connection between the socio-political situation of a place at a given time and the philosophy of that place at that particular period. Hence, in order to understand the philosophy of any philosopher, it is important to know the socio-political situation from which the philosopher arose. Contemporary African philosophy is predominantly a political philosophy, and it reflects the socio-political situation from which it arose. The socio-political situation of contemporary African raised questions in the minds of African thinkers and prompted them to focus their thoughts on political issues¹⁸.

The national ideological trend and school of thought in African philosophy is a desire for an independent Africa. In the 20th century, many African countries energetically desired political emancipation from their colonial

¹⁵Cited in Kanu, Ikechukwu A., “Trends in African Philosophy: A case for Eclecticism”. *Filosofia Theoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religion*. Vol. 2. No. 1. pp. 275-287.

¹⁶Cited in Kanu, Ikechukwu A., “On the Sources of African Philosophy”. *Filosofia Theoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religion*, Vol. 2. No. 1. pp. 337-356.

¹⁷ Omoregbe J. *Knowing Philosophy* (Lagos: Joja Educational Research and Publishers, 2018) P.30

¹⁸ Omoregbe J. *Knowing Philosophy*, 30

masters. In 1957, Ghana became independent, Nigeria followed suit in 1960; following was Namibia in 1989; and the early 1990s was South Africa¹⁹. This was driven by nationalist interests. The underlying philosophical framework was negritude; the affirmation or consciousness of the value of black or African culture and identity that resonated in the first half of the twentieth century²⁰. According to Chinua Achebe,

Negritude in Africa can be seen as an extension of the earlier work W.E.B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, Marcus Garvey, and C.L.R James, among others; they all established black intellectual and political liberation struggles but from very different albeit equally important vantage points in America. In the African context it was a reaction to the colonial experience through literate and political thought. It had powerful political allies in Nnamdi Azikiwe in Nigeria, Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana, Jomo Kenyatta in Kenya, Julius Nyerere in Tanzania, Patrice Lumumba in Congo, and later, Nelson Mandela, Steve Biko, and Walter Sisulu in South Africa. It is to note that the independence movement in Africa in

turn had a profound impact on the civil rights movement in America²¹.

At the heart of this was the “reclamation of the power of self-definition to recast Africa’s and therefore their own image through the written word – incredibly attractive and influential”²². According to Joseph Omoregbe:

Africa was divided among European countries for the purpose of exploitation, subjugation, and domination. European countries became “masters” of African nations and “owners” of everything in Africa which was any value. African nations were subjected to foreign domination and exploitation. The reins of government were forcefully seized from African rulers by the new rulers and self-appointed masters. Those who dared to resist were ruthlessly slaughtered. Having overpowered the African nations, the colonial masters began to humiliate, to rule, and to exploit them. They began to remove to their countries, everything they found in Africa which was of any value, and thus began the underdevelopment of Africa by the Europeans who exploited Africa to develop Europe. Africa began to be drained, impoverished and underdeveloped²³.

¹⁹ Kanu I.A *African Philosophy: An Ontologico-Existential Hermeneutic Approach To Classical and Contemporary Issues* (Jos: Augustinian Publication, 2015) P. 52

²⁰ Achebe C. *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra* (London: Penguin Publications, 2012), p. 163

²¹ Kanu I.A., *African Philosophy: An Ontologico-Existential Hermeneutic Approach To Classical and Contemporary Issues*, 163

²² Kanu I.A., *African Philosophy: An Ontologico-Existential Hermeneutic Approach To Classical and Contemporary Issues*, 163

²³ Omoregbe J. *Knowing Philosophy*, 31

This was also reflected in the works of Walter Rodney title *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*²⁴. This was the condition of Kenyatta as characterized in Kenya.

Theory of collectivism in Kenyatta

African political philosophy centers on integral development of the African people²⁵. Thus, Jomo Kenyatta's political philosophy was weaved around social and economic opportunities for all²⁶, achieved for the interest of the majority- a traditional kind of democracy²⁷. According to Jomo Kenyatta, "the Gikuyu system of government prior to the advent of the Europeans was based on true democratic principles"²⁸. He described the Gikuyu system of government as a representative government²⁹. He described the origin of the AfricanKenyan democracy thus:

Every village appointed a representative to the Council, which took the responsibility of drafting the new constitution. The first council

meeting was held at a place called Mokorwe wa Gathanga, situated in the center of the Gikuyu country, where the tribe is believed to have originated. At the first meeting of the *njama ya itwika* it was decided that in order to maintain harmony in the government of the country, it was necessary to make a few rules which would act as the guiding principles in the new government; and the following rules, which afterwards became law, were made³⁰.

The term *njama ya itwika* was the foundation of a democratic rule which have its origin from a revolution which took place prior to the colonial rule according to the tribal legend³¹. The *njama ya itwika* is known as *itwika* derived from the word *twika*³², which means to break away from autocracy to democracy³³. This breaking away was not for the achievement of personal interests but the interest of the entire community.

Alongside Jomo Kenyatta, most African scholars pushed for African socialism as the basis for reconstructing the African political system. African socialism is often known as Afro-socialism. It is the idea that economic resources should be shared in a traditional African manner³⁴. Kwame Nkrumah argues that "African socialism is designed as a growing African heritage; and it is a form of socialism of a distinctive kind; additionally,

²⁴ See Rodney W. *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (Tanzania: Tanzania Publishing House, 1972) P. 23

²⁵ Gbadebo M. "Muyiwa Falaiye's Philosophy of Cultural Adoptionism: An Introductory Appraisal". In a Study in African Socio – Political Philosophy, *Essay In Honour of Prof. Muyiwa Falaiye's* (eds) Anthony O. Samuel, Samuel B. Jegede, & Dotun O. (Lagos: University of Lagos Press, 2012) P.8

²⁶ Editorial Team, *The Vision of Mzee Jomo Kenyatta: Economic Development, Unity, and Pan-Africanism*.

<https://www.blackhistorymonth.org.uk/article/section/africa-history/the-vision-of-mzee-jomo-kenyatta-economic-development-unity-and-pan-africanism/> retrieved online 3rd May, 2023

²⁷ Kenyatta J. "The Gikuyu System of Government", In *Readings of African Political Thought* (eds) Gideon – Cyrus M. Mutiso & S.W. Rohio (London: Heinemann Publishers, 2007) P. 19

²⁸ Kenyatta J. "The Gikuyu System of Government", 19

²⁹ Kenyatta J. "The Gikuyu System of Government", 19

³⁰ Kenyatta J. "The Gikuyu System of Government", 19

³¹ Kenyatta J. "The Gikuyu System of Government", 19

³² Kenyatta J. "The Gikuyu System of Government", 19

³³ Kenyatta J. "The Gikuyu System of Government", 19

³⁴ Friedland H.W & Rosberg C.G. *African Socialism* (California: Stanford University Press, 1964) P.3

while African socialism may have some organizational traits of communism, it diverges significantly from the Marxist socialist perspective on key issues”³⁵.

It is in this regard that Jomo Kenyatta rejects communism as a political ideology. He asserts that, “communism is as bad as imperialism”³⁶. Despite his resentment for communism as a socio-political ideology his interest was more on the Kenyan people and this made him advocate for ‘Kenyan Nationalism’³⁷, which was for the struggle against imperialism. Nonetheless, Jomo Kenyatta was not against the white settlers but opened his hands in genuine friendship and cooperation and assistance³⁸. He said, “We may be under-developed, and our people may walk barefoot, but we are a proud people – proud of our heritage, our traditions and ancestry”³⁹.

In the phrase ‘African socialism’, the word ‘African’ is not introduced to describe a continent in which a foreign ideology is to be transplanted but meant to convey the African roots of a system that is itself African in its characteristics⁴⁰. African socialism is a term describing an African political and economic system that is

positively African and not imported from any country. The principal conditions of such a system must include:

- (i) it must draw on the best of African traditions;
- (ii) it must be adaptable to new and rapidly changing circumstances;
- (iii) it must not rest for its success on a satellite relationship with any other country or group of countries⁴¹.

Kenyatta’s theory of collectivism is drawn from two African traditions, which include: political democracy and mutual social responsibility⁴². He writes:

Political democracy implies that each member of the society is equal in his political rights and that no individual or group will be permitted to exert undue influence on the policies of the State. The State therefore, can never become the tool of special interests, catering to the desires of a minority at the expense of the needs of the majority. The state will represent all of the people and will do so impartially and without prejudice⁴³.

His theory of collectivism holds that when the state refuses to do what is right for the benefit of the people, the people through collective bargain can remove the representative from the state:

Elevation to high office was based entirely upon the community at

³⁵ Nkrumah K. *Class Struggle in Africa* (London: Panaf Books Limited, 1970) P.96

³⁶ Kenyatta J. “Kenyatta’s Views on Non-Alignment”. Kenya News Agency Handout, Number 368, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Nairobi, 1st June 1965. In C.J Gertzel et al., *Government and Politics in Kenya* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1969)

³⁷ Kenyatta J. “Kenyatta’s Views on Non-Alignment”.

³⁸ Kenyatta J. “Kenyatta’s Views on Non-Alignment”.

³⁹ Kenyatta J. “Kenyatta’s Views on Non-Alignment”.

⁴⁰ “Kenya’s Socialism” an extract from Kenya Government Sessional Paper No.10, 1965, ‘African Socialism and Its Application to Planning in Kenya’, A Ministry of Information, Kenya 1965. In *Readings in African Political Thought* (eds) Mutiso M. GC & Rohio S.W.

⁴¹ “Kenya’s Socialism” an extract from Kenya Government Sessional Paper No.10, 1965

⁴² “Kenya’s Socialism” an extract from Kenya Government Sessional Paper No.10, 1965

⁴³ “Kenya’s Socialism” an extract from Kenya Government Sessional Paper No.10, 1965

large. The group had the right to recall and dismiss or suspend any of its representatives whose behavior was contrary to the well-established rules of conduct. In fact, it was the voice of the people or public opinion that ruled. Individualism and self-seeking were ruled out, for every representative spoke in the name of his particular group or in the name of the tribe. The personal pronoun “I” was used very rarely in public assemblies⁴⁴.

In his words:

The spirit of collectivism was so much ingrained in the mind of the people that even eating, drinking, working, and sleeping were done collectively. This may sound like Utopia to those who are not acquainted with the Gikuyu tribal organization, but the fact remains that the system is still functioning in those parts of the country where the people have not yet been saturated with the Western individualistic ways of life⁴⁵.

The question of who should rule is central to political philosophy; and thus, by extension African political philosophy. In fact, in classical philosophical tradition as contained in the *Republic* the question of who should rule was central to Plato’s political philosophy. Nonetheless, Kenyatta’s question of who should rule is characterized in a direct rule; as against a representative

democracy which is also known as indirect democracy, a form of government whereby the people elect their representatives to carry out on the administration of the country⁴⁶. He argues that:

From *ndemi* generation onwards the principles of democratic government, as laid down by the first *itwika*, continued to function favorably until it was smashed by the British Government, who introduced a system of government very similar to the autocratic government which the Gikuyu people had discarded many centuries ago. The present system of rule by the Government Officials supported by appointed chiefs, and even what is called ‘indirect rule’, are incompatible with the democratic spirit of the Gikuyu people. It has been said that the Gikuyu do not respect their chiefs, namely, the ‘appointed ones’. This is perfectly true, and the reason is not far to seek⁴⁷.

According to Kenyatta,

The Gikuyu people do not regard those who have been appointed over their heads as the true representatives of the interests of the community. No one knows this better than the chief themselves, because many of them are only able to continue in their position through the fact that might is over right. The Gikuyu knows perfectly well that that these chiefs

⁴⁴ Kenyatta J. *The Gikuyu System of Government*, P19

⁴⁵ Kenyatta J. *The Gikuyu System of Government*, P19

⁴⁶ Agundu T.O. *Social and Political Philosophy in the Age of Globalization* (Abuja: DonAfrigue Publishers, 2019) P. 294

⁴⁷ Kenyatta J. *The Gikuyu System of Government*, P19

are appointed to represent a particular interest, namely, the interest of the British Government, and as such they cannot expect popularity from the people whom they help to oppress and exploit. In the eyes of the Gikuyu people, the submission to a despotic rule of any particular man or a group, white or black is the greatest humiliation to mankind⁴⁸.

At the heart of the political philosophy of Jomo Kenyatta is the centrality of the community, and the interest of the community.

Virtue in Kenyatta's political philosophy

Kenyatta admonished for virtue as the criteria for electing the right leaders. Leaders who should directly represent the people are virtuous as reflected in the *Politics* of Aristotle. He, therefore, writes:

In fact, it seems probable that the reason why kingly government was the rule in early times is that it was rare to find persons of extremely eminent virtue, especially as the State of those times were small. And further, kingly power was then conferred upon individuals as reward of services rendered to the State⁴⁹.

He argues that:

...it is the function of good men to render such services, and if they were rewarded with kingly power, the number of good men must have

been very small. In process of time, however, there came to be a number of persons equally virtuous, and then they no longer submitted to kingly rule, but sought to establish a sort of commune or constitutional government. From oligarchies they passed in the first instance to tyrannies and from tyranny again to democracy⁵⁰.

It is, therefore, not enough to have the tact of leadership for Kenyatta. This must be based on the virtuous life of the leader. The achievement of the good of the community is based on the choice of a virtuous leader.

The ontological foundation of human right

Human right is central to the political democracy of Jomo Kenyatta's political philosophy. In the *Kenya White Paper*, Jomo Kenyatta declared that:

It is the mission of Great Britain to work continuously for the training and education of the Africans towards a higher intellectual, moral and economic level than which they had reached when the Crown assumed the responsibility for the administration of this territory. It is beyond our comprehension to see how a people can reach a so-called 'higher level' while they are denied the most elementary human rights of self-expression, freedom of speech, the right to form social organizations to improve their condition, and

⁴⁸ Kenyatta J. *The Gikuyu System of Government*, P19

⁴⁹ Aristotle *Politics* was reflected in the works of Jomo Kenyatta, P. 19.

⁵⁰ Aristotle *Politics* was reflected in the works of Jomo Kenyatta, P. 19.

above all, the right to move freely in their country⁵¹.

Hence, these rights are rights that are natural to a person, and given to him or her by the society. According to Kenyatta, these rights are the rights enjoyed by the Gikuyu people even before the advent of the colonial masters. Human rights for Kenyatta are not given but form the ontological basis that constitutes or differentiates adulthood from a mere child. He avers that:

To return to our analysis of the Gikuyu system of government, we have seen that the circumcision ceremony was the only qualification which gave a man the recognition of manhood and the full right of citizenship. It is, therefore, necessary to take the circumcision ceremony as our starting point. Before a boy goes through the ceremony he is considered as a mere child, and as such no responsibility in the tribal organization; his parents are responsible for all his actions⁵².

Jomo Kenyatta adds that:

If he commits any crime he cannot be prosecuted personally, it is his parent's duty to answer for him. But this liberty ceases immediately he is circumcised, but he is now 'full grown', and has assumed the title of *mondo-morome* (a he-man), and as such he must share the responsibility with other 'he-men' (*arome*)⁵³.

Therefore, this qualifies the person as person to join the national council of warriors with all the rights, privileges and responsibilities in the society. By virtue of the political thought of Kenyatta, human rights are not alien to the African, but child rights are not the same as human right. This does not suggest that there are no child rights; but, child rights are subsumed in human rights and as such, in the thought of Kenyatta, the rights of the child is subsumed in the parents who takes full responsibility in the protection of the child until they reach adulthood.

The advent of colonialism destroyed the ontological basis on which the African built his rights. According to Kenyatta:

The African has been reduced to a state of serfdom; his initiative in social, economic, and political structure has been denied, his spirit of manhood has been killed and he has been subjected to the most inferior position in human society. If he dares to express his opinion on any point, other than what is dictated to him, he is shouted at and black-listed as an 'agitator'. The tribal democratic institutions which were the boast of the country, and the proof of tribal good sense, have been suppressed. Oppressive laws and ordinances, which alone engross the monopoly of thought, of will, and of judgment, have been imposed on the African people⁵⁴.

⁵¹ Kenyatta J. *The Gikuyu System of Government* P.22

⁵² Kenyatta J. *The Gikuyu System of Government*, 22

⁵³ Kenyatta J. *The Gikuyu System of Government*, 22

⁵⁴ Kenyatta J. *The Gikuyu System of Government*. p.22

This does not in any way exclude women as regards their own nature of rights. In fact, Kenyatta admonished that:

All men and women must get married, and that no man should be allowed to hold responsible position other than warrior, or become a member of the council of elders (*kiama*) unless he was married and had established his own homestead; and that women should be given the same social status as their husbands⁵⁵.

Conclusion

The discourses of Jomo Kenyatta are important to the development of African socio-political philosophy. African political philosophy in the works of Jomo Kenyatta is a product of a critical thinking and the relation of the African socio-political reality to the African philosophical tradition. Jomo Kenyatta's political philosophy brings to the table a resonating template to solve African political problems. His idea of an emerging African democracy that constitutes the framework of an African democracy brings to bear the ontological foundation of an African democracy.

Several competing trends continue to characterize African politics. Democracy is gaining ground in some regions, lending credence to the notion of an African Renaissance across the continent. More so, citizens in countries such as Botswana, Mali, and South Africa, for example, have more political competition, freer media, and stronger civil rights than at any other point

in their independent history. However, the path of democratization has been reversed in many other countries of Africa, especially with the emergence of military take overs of democratic governments. Poverty, power conflicts, ethnic warfare, bad governance, and corruption continue to threaten the African Renaissance across the continent. All these show that there is still so much more to learn from the political philosophy of Jomo Kenyatta.

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