

# Ideographs of suppression: Jomo Kenyatta's Independence Day speech

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## Introduction

In his ethnographic account of the Kikuyu people of central Kenya, Jomo Kenyatta devotes a chapter to their system of governance. He describes the differing decision-making bodies as inclusive and supremely democratic. In his account, government is perfectly attuned to the needs of the people only to be disrupted by British colonialism. "Today", he wrote, "an African, no matter what his station in life, is like a horse that moves only in the direction that the rider pulls the rein".<sup>1</sup> Twenty-five years after the publication of *Facing Mount Kenya*, Kenyatta would become Kenya's prime minister in 1963 and the first elected president in 1964.

Born Kamau wa Moigoi in the mid-1890s, Kenyatta was baptised and took the name Johnstone Kamau in his early twenties. He likely adopted the name Jomo Kenyatta upon the publication of *Facing Mount Kenya* in 1938.<sup>2</sup> Kenyatta attended colleges and universities in London and Moscow and lived abroad from 1931 to 1946. Associated with land reform and the Mau Mau Rebellion that opposed the increasing numbers of white settlements in Kenya, Kenyatta was imprisoned from 1952 to 1959.

By the late 1950s, Britain concluded that an independent Kenya better served its long-term defense interests than a colony wracked by open rebellion and inter-ethnic conflict.<sup>3</sup> By supporting Kenyatta, the British would be assured of a moderate government (as opposed to what it considered to be a more radical and Soviet-friendly Odinga government) that would facilitate Western interests while remaining credible to internal nationalistic movements.

It is in this context that Kenyatta delivered his Independence Day speech on 12 December 1963 at Uhuru Park in Nairobi. The speech marked the end of colonial rule but it did not mark the end of colonial influence. The speech declared independence but it did not create a discursive space for the autonomy and self-determination of Kenya's populace. In this article, we examine two key ideographic terms that are significant within the speech:

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<sup>1</sup> Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya, the tribal life of the Gikuyu* (London: Heineman, 1979): 213.

<sup>2</sup> Barbara Celarent, "Facing Mount Kenya by Jomo Kenyatta", *American Journal of Sociology* 116 (2010): 722.

<sup>3</sup> David Percox, *Britain, Kenya and the Cold War: Imperial defence, colonial security and decolonization* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 2004): 8.

*harambee* and *uhuru*. We argue that Kenyatta redirects these terms from their traditional meaning that emphasises communal cooperation and anchors them to the enterprise of state-building. In the speech, the call for “unity” constructs an uncritical conformity that prolongs the subservience under colonialism.

Part 1. provides a description of the speech delivered by Kenyatta. Part 2. provides an ideographic critique of the speech and the conclusion advances several implications for ideographs and statecraft in Africa. Kenya’s history is incredibly complex, as have been its political relationships to other African nations and beyond. We do not write as historians but as critics interested in providing an account of this key rhetorical moment within the larger postcolonial project of understanding “the problematics and contexts of de/colonization”.<sup>4</sup>

## 1. Colonialism and the spirit of *harambee*

Kenyatta’s Independence Day speech meets the traditional expectations of epideictic speech. In delivering praise or blame at a public ceremony, the speaker is afforded an opportunity to identify and prescribe “right behavior”.<sup>5</sup> Epideictic rhetoric affirms common values in honoring an accomplishment that in this case was the formation of an independent government for the Republic of Kenya. The context is a celebration of Kenya’s independence from British colonial rule. Kenyatta uses numerous strategies — exemplifications, description and narration — to reach a diverse audience comprised of Kenyans, colonial administrators, world leaders, and citizens of newly independent and colonised African nations at the time. The speech displays the conciliatory and inclusive themes that are intended to mark the early years of Kenyatta’s presidency. He used the speech to preview his agenda: national unity and pride, broad and non-aligned international relations, improving the economy, and maintaining civil order.

The first part of the speech (spoken in English) is congratulatory and pays homage to all who struggled for independence. Kenyatta declares that: “All the people of Kenya should remember and pay tribute to those people of all races, tribes and colours who — over the years — have made their contribution to Kenya’s rich heritage”. Kenyatta notes that Britain has “watched over” the destiny of Kenya and announces that the “close ties” between the two nations “are not severed today”. Kenyatta envisions a nation guided by high ideals of unity, tolerance and “social wellbeing”. Kenyatta asks

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<sup>4</sup> Raka Shome and Radha S. Hegde, “Postcolonial approaches to communication: Charting the terrain, engaging the intersections”, *Communication Theory* (2002): 249-270 [250].

<sup>5</sup> James A. Herrick, *The history and theory of rhetoric: An introduction* (Boston: Pearson, 2009): 86.

for a dedication to nation building that goes beyond the attainment of freedom; he sets as national goals the eradication of poverty, ignorance and disease inspired by the spirit of “*harambee*” (pulling together).

The second part of the speech addresses the audience in Kiswahili to reinforce a common identity, a shared worldview and “a people’s definition of themselves”.<sup>6</sup> Echoing the “new nationalism” of the period, the common experience of colonisation is noted and Kenyatta urges African unity.<sup>7</sup>

Kenyatta invites Kenyans to remember the struggle against the colonial powers and to unite for a better future for Kenyans and all exploited Africans. He reminds his listeners that colonisation was “not of our choice” but that “our friendship with the Queen... will now be of greater value”. Even as Kenyans must fight to loosen the “foreign rule” in other African nations, there should be “faithfulness” at home.

To engage Kenyans in the process of nation building, Kenyatta elaborates the meaning of freedom as hard work (*uhuru na kazi*), self-reliance, self-determination and respect for the law. These themes of freedom, prosperity, and nation building are expressed by use of metaphors, proverbs, biblical references, collective memory of Kenyan history, and significant Swahili terms (such as *uhuru* and *harambee*) to command collective action. As in the English portion, Kenyatta concludes his speech by urging Kenyans to commit to *harambee* in order to solidify the historical significance of the day and sustain the future of a newly independent nation.

The development of themes and use of ideographs, the invocation of different languages and variation in tone reveals Kenyatta as a skilled rhetor in his own way. His ability to remain in dialogue on diverse interests, the needs of a new nation, cordial relations with the former coloniser, unity and support for colonised African nations sets the context for our interpretation of this key rhetorical moment.

## 2. Ideographs and constituting a national ethos

Each culture or society develops a language that reflects a certain sensibility. From that language certain terms emerge that “contain a unique ideological commitment” and are “one-term sums of an orientation”.<sup>8</sup> For McGee, ideographs help to identify the discursive means for political control. Leaders who link policy and decisions to ideographs access the predispositions of audiences and thereby increase understanding and acceptance. Delgado

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<sup>6</sup> Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong’o, *Decolonising the mind: The politics of language in African language* (Oxford: James Curry Ltd., 1986): 4.

<sup>7</sup> C. G. Rosberg, “Kenyatta, Jomo”, in *Political lives*, H. Young, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001): 397-400.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Calvin McGee, “The ‘Ideograph’: A link between rhetoric and ideology”, *Quarterly Journal of Speech* (1980): 7.

explored how Fidel Castro in 1961 employed the ideograph 'revolution' to advance a new political culture in Cuba.<sup>9</sup> Cloud argued that the ideographic expression 'clash of civilizations' helped to frame the United States of America's relationship to Islam and justify military action during the G.W. Bush presidency.<sup>10</sup> Analysis of ideographs can point to how their customary meanings can be adapted by rhetors to address exigent circumstances.<sup>11</sup>

Kenyatta employs terms with deep ideological meaning in order to advance a new national ethos. *Harambee* was a well-known expression not only among the Kikuyu people but among other ethnicities as well. It referred to the common practice of community participation. According to Galia Sabar, "Kenyatta linked the traditional, village-level principles of *harambee* with the broad national requirements for cooperative endeavor" toward the "task of national development".<sup>12</sup> Similarly, *uhuru* invoked the national desire for self-governance and the return of lands stolen by the white settlers. Implied in *uhuru* is a peaceful co-existence among peoples upon the removal of the common British threat.

*Uhuru* was to usher in both a restoration of customs and traditions disrupted during the colonial era and entry into the modernism of the 'developed' world. In his analysis of the relevance of African cultural values in African modernity, Kwame Gyekye considers most African cultural values "when the appropriate and necessary amendments and refinements have been made, to be relevant to African modernity, that is, to be the cultural life of the African people in the modern world".<sup>13</sup>

However, both *harambee* and *uhuru* are re-fitted to advance the labour and economic worth theme that is established early in the speech. Kenyatta refers to Kenya as a "thriving country" that has benefitted from the "labour" of all who have "made their contributions". The potential of the rich land is the "inheritance" that the independent people of Kenya must be worthy to receive.

Under the guise of these ideographs, Kenyatta could justify his consolidation of power by arguing that political division would undermine the work necessary to improve the country. During this period, Kenyatta was working with the British to limit future political opposition. The constitution

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<sup>9</sup> Fernando Delgado, "The rhetoric of Fidel Castro: Ideographs in the service of revolutionaries", *The Howard Journal of Communication* (1999): 1-14.

<sup>10</sup> Dana L. Cloud, "'To veil the threat of terror': Afghan women and the 'clash of civilizations' in the imagery of the U.S. war on terrorism", *Quarterly Journal of Speech* (2004): 285-306.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* 288.

<sup>12</sup> Galia Sabar, *Church, State and society in Kenya: From mediation to opposition, 1963-1993* (London: Frank Cass, 2002): 67.

<sup>13</sup> Kwame Gyekye, *African cultural values: An introduction* (Philadelphia: Sankofa Publishing Company, 1996). 171.

soon would be amended to secure more authority for the president so that he would not be hindered by the parliament. The notion of *uhuru* is applied to serve the interests of the government and maintain the status quo rather than assure the people of a government that is accountable to its people.

In the Kiswahili portion of the speech, Kenyatta is much more direct in explaining the transactional relationship between the governed and the government. It also defines the role of his government and its ideological positions. The shift from friendly/diplomatic demeanor to assertive independent voice of a leader of a new nation-state reveals Kenyatta's contradictory rhetorical persona. Condemnation of colonialism and injustice to African people is juxtaposed with institutionalisation of the police and prisons in Kenya.

Africa has nearly been "milked dry", Kenyatta explains, and unless people unite "we will be finished". The people must dedicate themselves to hard work because "there will be nothing from heaven". People must work hard and be faithful in order for independence to have meaning. "An African Government wants faithfulness", he states. To ensure faithfulness, he warns, "The Police and the Prisons will remain".

That Kenyatta would draw upon traditional terms is not unexpected. Joanna Lewis observed that, "Kenyatta's conservative and elitist views were grounded in solutions that drew on an elder's view of what was best for Kikuyuland".<sup>14</sup> What is startling is the degree to which Kenyatta openly scolds the people of Kenya and admonishes his listeners to work to develop the nation since "Kenyatta cannot give you everything".

At the same time, Kenyatta reflects the cultural hybridity that is a consequence of colonialism. Early in his speech he thanks the Christian missionaries who had assisted the people of Kenya. In the portion of the speech spoken in Kiswahili, Kenyatta explains how the Biblical Children of Israel depended on God to help them in the desert. He draws a contrast to that situation stating that now God "had closed the door" and "work" was the only path to fulfilling independence.

What Kenyatta does not say is that the government would depend heavily upon the internationally-funded religious organisations to fill the void left by British withdrawal. Though the British would continue to have military staging areas within the country and train Kenyatta's bodyguards, their direct support of the people would be limited. Though Kenyatta affirmed the "thriving" quality of the land, he assured long-term dependence upon outside entities when no clear plan for land equity and power sharing emerged.

The acknowledgment of suffering inflicted on Kenyans during the colonial era did not provide specific strategies for how to heal the nation internally and externally. Kenyatta assumed that a new understanding could

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<sup>14</sup> Joanna Lewis, *Empire State-building, war & welfare in Kenya, 1925-1952* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000): 248.

be reached by perfecting relations with the coloniser. Recent events in Kenya reveal the need to redefine ways Kenyans seek healing from the effects of colonialism. The decision by President Kibaki to lift a ban imposed upon Mau Mau by the British government in 1952 and upheld by the Kenyan government (1963-2002) has opened legal avenues to address concerns still very strong in the public memory. Since 2003 Mau Mau fighters and their families have taken legal action against the government of the United Kingdom seeking compensation for atrocities committed against them by the colonial government. This politically enacted response by the victims illustrates the frustrations Kenyans still hold about what happened to their families.<sup>15</sup>

Hostilities among ethnic groups in Kenya are directly linked to land-ownership conflicts started in early 1950s. Land-ownership conflicts triggered inter-ethnic territorial claims notably among communities living in the Mt. Elgon area.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, territorial proclamations elsewhere in the country are also about identity and belongingness. The fierce 2007-8 post-elections violence stands as evidence of unresolved land issues in the country.

The failure to address the ethnic relations and land issues draws our attention to interrogate *Uhuru na kazi* as a motto to self-reliance and self-determination. It was not clear how Kenyatta planned to mobilise communities for collective work when they struggled with issues of identity, landlessness and dependency on colonial government and NGOs.

## Conclusion

After two World Wars in the first half of the twentieth century, the major European colonisers seemed exhausted and content to focus on re-building at home. The stage seemed set for sweeping decolonisation across Africa. Hopes of freedom and relief from internal violence were high among the people of Kenya in the early 1960s. The aspirations also were high within the Kenya African National Union, the political party that carried the first national elections. But as Edwin A. Gimode notes, “the actual unfolding of political events during the Kenyatta era proved to be antithetical to these hopes”.<sup>17</sup>

Oginga Odinga’s proclamation in 1967 of “Not yet uhuru”<sup>18</sup> set off

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<sup>15</sup> Joyce Mulama, “Former freedom fighters to sue Britain for compensation”: <http://ipsnews.net/africa/interna.asp?idnews=20175>. (Accessed 21 January 2013).

<sup>16</sup> Margaret Gathoni Gecaga, “Religious movements and democratisation in Kenya: Between the sacred and the profane”, in *Kenya: The struggle for democracy*, eds. G. R. Murunga and S. W. Nasong’o (Dakar: Codesria, 2007): 69.

<sup>17</sup> Edwin A. Gimode, “The role of the police in Kenya’s democratisation process”, in *Kenya: The struggle for democracy*, G. R. Murunga and S. W. Nasong’o, eds. (Dakar: Codesria, 2007): 233.

<sup>18</sup> Oginga Odinga, *Not Yet Uhuru* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967).

fierce opposition to Kenyatta's government that continued into the Moi regime. Concerns about the unfulfilled promises of *uhuru* are also echoed in the early 1970s by J. M. Kariuki's opposition to Kenyatta's government on grounds of capitalism, corruption, land tenure and the increasing wealth of the business, political and administrative elites.<sup>19</sup> Ali Mazrui offers support for the assessment of "Not yet uhuru" by identifying "freedom gaps" needed to be filled for all Kenyans to fully claim *uhuru*.<sup>20</sup>

We have argued that Kenyatta's state-building rhetoric — anchored by the ideographs *harambee* and *uhuru* — activated cultural dispositions that potentially could have constituted mutually beneficial relations between Nairobi and the people. Instead, the terms were reformulated to emphasise state benefit and ultimately the terms worked to reproduce the relations of colonisation.

Ali Mazrui explains indigenising freedom as a strategy that involves tapping indigenous values, traditional technologies, native cultures and languages, and ancient paradigms.<sup>21</sup> Kenyatta fails to recognize the primacy of culture in uniting Kenyans in a new nation. Strategies to reclaim local cultural values condemned by colonialism and Christianity should have been prioritised as constituting a national ethos.

A consideration towards indigenising freedom would have included more use of Kenyan/African metaphors, idioms and values to explain the meaning and expectations of *harambee* and *uhuru* and the Government of the people of Kenya. Kenyatta was positioned to lead the indigenisation of Kenya given his educational and cultural experiences locally and abroad. He was known to epitomise African and more so Kikuyu traditions. For example, he popularised the use of Kiswahili in the national assembly and donned his trademark symbols of traditional authority: beaded Masai hat, carved walking cane and whisk. The cultural apparel are symbols of traditional authority and as such positioned Kenyatta as a person who understood the complexities of staying connected to indigenous cultures and still managing to navigate new cultural contexts. Ideographs, however maimed, remain powerful rhetorical resources.

Though Jomo Kenyatta is considered the founder of Kenya, he may not be its most well known figure. After colonial rule, there was an urgent need to replace the British civil service workers with skilled and highly trained Kenyans. By the early 1960s, Kenya was sending many promising students to

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<sup>19</sup> Charles Hornsby, "When Kenyatta lost control of events in government": <http://www.standardmedia.co.ke/?articleID=2000058095>. (Accessed 21 January 2013).

<sup>20</sup> Ali Mazrui, "*Uhuru bado Kidogo: Africa's condition of Not Yet Uhuru: the balance sheet*": <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/africa-oped/message/26016> (Accessed 20 February 2013).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

the United States of America and Europe for university study.<sup>22</sup> A young biology major was among the students sent abroad. Shortly before Kenyatta's death in 1978, Wangari Maathi, another Christian, Western-educated scholar founded The Green Belt Movement.<sup>23</sup> In 2004, Maathi was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace and upon her death in 2011, tributes to her work poured in from leaders across the globe.

The slogan for the Green Belt Movement — a women's empowerment movement that focused on planting trees — was "Save the land *harambee*". Due to the corruption of the Kenyatta regime, *harambee* had fallen into disrepute. Wangari's adoption of this term was a rhetorical effort to shift its meaning from government tithe to village self-determination. In this sense, she was reclaiming *harambee* as an indigenous practice even as the term spoke in opposition to government development and political opportunism.

Kenyatta certainly lives on in the collective public memory. Perhaps the two clearest moments remembered by Kenyans is the lowering of the Union Jack and Kenyatta's call for *harambee!* But Kenyatta's presence is being actively eroded. Currency no longer bears his visage and holidays are being renamed to express a broader nationalistic identity. A new national ethos is being constituted and a fragile new hope remains.

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<sup>22</sup> Jim C. Harper, II, *Western-educated elites in Kenya, 1900-1963: The African American factor* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>23</sup> Wangari W. Maathai, *The Green Belt Movement: Sharing the approach and Experience* (New York: Lantern Books, 2004).