



African Ethics

Gĩkũyũ Traditional Morality

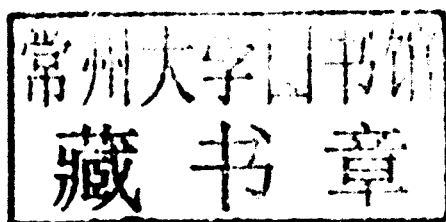
Hannah Wangeci Kinoti

S TUDIES IN
I NTERCULTURAL
P HILOSOPHY

AFRICAN ETHICS GĨKŪYŪ TRADITIONAL MORALITY

Hannah Wangeci Kinoti

Edited by G. Wakuraya Wanjohi
with the assistance of Gerald J. Wanjohi



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AFRICAN ETHICS

GĪKŪYŪ TRADITIONAL MORALITY

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19

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PREFACE

Hannah Kinoti's book *African ethics: Gikūyū traditional morality* forms an important contribution to the question of what African philosophy is.

The debate about African philosophy arose in connection with the struggle of the African peoples for independence and the regained self-consciousness during the first years of their independence. This debate took place on the African continent and outside it. It was combined with the question what the place of African philosophy is or has to be in the intercultural philosophical discourse of world-philosophy. It was part and parcel of the colonial way of thinking, as it was expressed by the Western philosophers of the Enlightenment, and in a very clear and radical manner by Hegel, that in Sub-Saharan Africa there did not exist any form of philosophy.

However, hard facts are the theories developed by the leaders in the struggle for independence, and the ideas worked out to prove that there is and has been through the past centuries a body of thought that had an immediate philosophical impact. Nevertheless, the work in the various Departments of Philosophy at African universities has been and still is strongly oriented towards Western philosophy. In this connection the African style of thinking takes its shape through the specific ways in which it deals with Western ideas.

For the actual philosophical work, the question of what traditional African philosophy is as well as its meaning, has extensively been discussed by both African and non-African scholars. Traditional African philosophy is coherent in the chorus constituted by the many voices of African people's ways of thought. In other words, there is a common thread running through the song of this choir as to what is African in African philosophies.

Fortunately, we now know more clearly about the specific philosophical traditions of some of the many African peoples. Claude Sumner, who styles himself as a Canadian by birth and an Ethiopian by choice, has published a five-volume work which is the result of his compilation, translation, and

commentary on Ethiopian philosophy (mainly worked out by members of the Amharic people), dating back to the fourth century. In addition, Sumner has collected and published Proverbs, Songs and Folktales as sources of the philosophy of the Oromo, another large and important ethnic group of Ethiopia. Kwame Gyekye from Ghana has presented in detail the philosophical thought of the Akan. His presentation is mainly based on proverbs and on conversations with Akan sages. Using the concepts of belief and knowledge in the Yoruba language as well as the interpretation of the Yoruba oral tradition, B. Hallen and J.O. Sodipo have brought out the philosophy of the people who find their home in Nigeria, Niger, and Benin. An important contribution has also been accomplished through the interpretation of Yoruba literature by Sophie B. Oluwole.

Innocent I. Asouzu has explained at great length the thought of what he calls the anonymous philosophers of the Igbo of Nigeria. What is worked out in an Igbo context has, according to Asouzu, a universal meaning.

The presentation of the teachings of Tierno Bokar, the sage of Bandiagara, a city in the present state of Mali, by Amadou Hampaté Ba contains information about the philosophical ideas of this people. Henry Odera Oruka has interviewed several sages of the Luo, Gikūyū, Luhya, and other Kenyan peoples, as the basis for his work on Sage Philosophy.

These are some well known examples of philosophies of different African communities. As for the philosophy of the Gikūyū in Kenya, it has already been presented by Gerald J. Wanjohi who gives a systematic interpretation of the proverbs in the language of this people.

In addition to this, the book of Hannah Kinoti offers a more detailed and more concrete explanation of the ethics of the Gikūyū. Thus she contributes in an essential way to the knowledge of a crucial aspect of the philosophy of this people. The literature on Gikūyū culture is used comprehensively. Traditional moral opinions which have been taken mainly from interviews with older people are contrasted with those of middle and younger generations who were also subjects of interviews. The philosophical value of Kinoti's book stems from the fact that she focuses on key concepts of Gikūyū morality. These are honesty, generosity, justice, courage, and temperance. These concepts are described and analyzed with both precision and sensitivity. In this way a philosophical panorama of Gikūyū ethics is presented. In their mutual relationships, these concepts show clearly how morality is the binding force of the traditional African Gikūyū culture.

Zoetermeer/Netherlands, June 1, 2010

Heinz Kimmerle

FOREWORD

The invitation to write a foreword for this book came as a pleasant surprise. It brought back all kinds of fond memories of those long-ago days discussing with Hannah Kinoti her research into Gikūyū traditional morality. She was my research student, and later on colleague, at the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, University of Nairobi.

In the study that is now being published as a book, the author set out to discover what had happened to Gikūyū moral and social thought and practice under an oppressive colonial system and the influence of Christianity, which had been introduced by foreign missionaries. The study, by an insider, seeks to understand the conceptual basis of traditional Gikūyū morality and its rationality. It also seeks to discover whether or not morality had a religious foundation. It then examines changes to key constants or virtues (honesty, generosity, justice, courage and temperance) in the colonial period and in the rapidly changing post-colonial context.

Kinoti's remarkable study succeeds in integrating these aspects of morality in a convincing way. It goes to the core of the issue by establishing the impact of colonialism – which was a system characterized by exploitation, oppression, and denigration of everything African – as well as of Christian missionaries who frequently disregarded or misinterpreted the moral and religious values of the Gikūyū and of other people. In this way, the study is also the story of an historic process. In order to take this historic process into account the author based her research on the interviews of three age groups. The first was a group of old people who had had firsthand experience of the traditional life before it had been diluted by foreign influences; the second group consisted of younger people who had experienced the

transition from the traditional way of life to the new life under colonialism and Christianity; the third group comprised young people who had little experience of traditional life.

The outcome of Kinoti's unique approach is a valuable book that is well documented and illustrated with Gikūyū pithy sayings, songs and striking proverbs. The study intrigued me from its beginning as she and I discussed her research ideas; at the time, though, I did not fully appreciate its importance. It intrigues me even more now as I see its final outcome and conclusions. I cannot but be amazed by its value and importance. Kinoti herself stresses the importance of this work when she concludes that her study of traditional Gikūyū society shows that "morality and religious belief are inseparable".

In conclusion, I do not hesitate to affirm that Hannah Kinoti's study is a confirmation that God was already at work in the world before Christ's coming. His moral law is to be found in all societies.

Professor emeritus J.G. Donders
(Washington Theological Union)

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On behalf of my late wife Hannah I want to say a warm thank you to all the colleagues, friends and relatives who have contributed either to the publication of this book or to the research on which it is based. Harold Miller initiated and managed the process that culminated in the publication of the book. He also obtained a grant to meet the costs and identified someone with the editorial skills to turn a Ph.D. thesis into a readable book. G. Wakuraya Wanjohi, with the valuable assistance of her husband Dr. Gerald J. Wanjohi, did an excellent job of editing. Professor Heinz Kimmerle not only introduced the work to the publisher, Editions Rodopi, but also contributed the preface. We are grateful as well to the Series Editor, Dr. Henk Oosterling, who prepared the draft for its pre-press version.

Professor J.G. Donders has made important contributions to this book. When he was on the staff of the University of Nairobi he served as Hannah's principal advisor in her doctoral work. He and the late Professor S.G. Kibicho gave invaluable advice and encouragement. In addition, Professor Donders has kindly written the foreword to the book. Many other members of the staff of the University of Nairobi made important contributions to Hannah's study of Gikuyu traditional morality. Among them were the late Professor Oruka Odera, Professor Godfrey Muriuki, and Father S.N. Clements. The late Professor Joseph Mungai gave enthusiastic support to Hannah's research. Mr. E.N. Gichuhi, the University Registrar, and his colleagues facilitated the work in various ways. John Nottingham, Professor Kihumbu Thairu and Dr. Wanja Thairu encouraged first Hannah, and later me, to get the thesis published in book form.

Crucial to this study was a group of thirty-one informants. It comprised men and women, ranging in age from 20 to 90 years and drawn from the then Nyeri and Kiambu districts of central Kenya. They generously gave of their time and many of them offered Hannah hospitality when she visited their homes.

Financial support for the research came from the University of Nairobi. A grant by the Mennonite Central Committee made the publication of the book possible.

I would also like to acknowledge the various contributions made to the publication of the book by our children: Karimi (who helped to initiate the publication process), Kathambi, Wangari, Wanjiru and Kimathi.

Hannah largely owed her education, from primary school to university, to Mama Ruth, Ruth Wanjiru Gathii. Mama Ruth laboured hard to raise school fees and other expenses through the sale of produce from her farm. Hannah and I were overjoyed when in her old age she was able to witness the award of a PhD degree to Hannah. On Hannah's behalf and with deep gratitude I dedicate this book to the memory of Mama Ruth.

Nairobi, January 2009

George Kinoti

A note on Gĩkũyũ orthography

When the Gĩkũyũ language was first put into writing, there was no agreement on how to express certain sounds and diphthongs, nor how to translate these into English. Because of this disagreement the word for the Gĩkũyũ people 'Agĩkũyũ' and for the language 'Gĩkũyũ' were, with rare exceptions, both translated as 'Kikuyu'. In this work the proper Gĩkũyũ spelling has been employed; it is used both for the people as well as for the language.

Editor