

**A Place to Stand:  
African Independence Dependent on  
Her Own Strengths and Creativity**

**Aart Deddens Interview with  
Henk Haenen and Antony Otieno Ong'ayo<sup>1</sup>**

***Introductory comment by Deddens:** If Africa is to stand on its own feet, then it needs a place to stand, both literally and figuratively. That is one of the most important insights of Henk Haenen, author of Sage filosofie: Pleidooi voor Afrikaanse wegen naar zelfstandigheid.<sup>2</sup> This is a conversation about the book, together with Antony Otieno Ong'ayo from Kenya. They are planning joint research.*

*What are sages?*

*Haenen:* Sages are African philosophers or teachers of wisdom. Characteristic for them is the oral tradition in which they stand and from which they derive inspiration. Their philosophy is expressed tersely in expressions that resemble proverbs. These function like clothes hangers on which they hang their argumentations. Usually these sages have an advisory function. That is why they choose a practical focus and are ethically oriented. They aim at improvement of social reality and have therefore also a political dimension. The prophetic perspective of these sages is also significant. Their proverbs are comparable to oracles in which directions towards solutions might be found in complex situations. The person seeking advice is himself invited to participate in the search, to think along. Out of that context of listening actively, it is possible for the sage to arrive at a concrete (political) insight. It is a matter of shared responsibility.

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<sup>1</sup>*Sophie*, September 2013, pp. 28-31. Transl. Jan H. Boer. Original title: "Grond onder de voeten: Verzelfstandiging Afrika afhankelijk van eigen kracht en creativiteit." All footnotes in this article are the translator's.

<sup>2</sup>An English title might be: *Philosophy of the Sages: A Plea for African Routes Towards Independence.*

*Ong'ayo*: In Kenya and its neighbouring countries this emphasis of the sages on shared responsibility is of great practical significance. *It is a basic principle of and a ground for the concrete formation of democracy that makes it possible to weave valuable elements of ancient traditions, including African democratic ones, into the modern institutions of politics, economics and society.*<sup>3</sup>The sage and politician Oginga Odinga used to emphasize this, especially the experience of cooperation as well as the social and economic solidarity of the society.

*Can you give some examples of such wisdom maxims?*

*Haenen*: Let me quote a few sayings of President Nyerere of Tanzania that have been collected in *Het boekje van Nyerere*, a publication at the initiative of the *Nationale Commissie Ontwikkelingsstrategie* in 1972.<sup>4</sup> A brief explanation can clarify the power of these sayings. “We Africans have as little need to be converted to socialism as we do to be instructed in the ways of democracy.”

Nyerere said this in the context of the Cold War and thus gave expression to the attempt of the so-called “Third Way,” a direction of countries that had distanced themselves from colonial politics. However, economically they were not yet independent. They accepted aid from the Soviet Union and China as well as from the West, but strictly on their own terms. The countries south of the Sahara were only partially successful in this respect.

*Ong'ayo*: Kwame Nkrumah, a prominent fighter for independence in Ghana and an example for all of Africa, put it succinctly, “Africa must unite!” On her way to genuine independence, especially economically, Africa must

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<sup>3</sup> Translator: Italics are mine, not original.

<sup>4</sup>The Dutch were so impressed with Nyerere that a government agency, the name of which could be translated as the “National Commission for Development Strategy,” published a little book with selected sayings (The Hague: Staatsuitgeverij, 1972). For examples of these sayings see (<https://books.google.ca/books?id=m1XOPuSB21AC&pg=PA128&lpg=PA128&dq=het+boekje+van+nyerere&source=bl&ots=7eCZ-Zqrwj&sig=Yq5VbMJ-cPBsLRIP>; for some examples see pp. 129-130). Unfortunately they are all translated into Dutch. I am not sure to what extent a re-translation into English on my part will mirror the original, but having read some. I will nevertheless re-translate those in our text and hope for the best.

bundle all her strength. This is a lengthy process in which African nations are still fully involved.

*Haenen:* Another example of a Nyerere saying: “The term ‘family sense’ defines our socialism. It counters capitalism, which seeks to build a better world on basis of the exploitation of one person by another. It similarly counters doctrinaire socialism, that seeks to develop a better world on basis of a philosophy that unavoidably leads to struggle between one person and another.” With “our socialism,” Nyerere meant African communalism . This meant a development of the society by means of small-scale communities that would have a cooperative and familiar character. Here he sought to link up with existing African traditions of community.

*Ong’ayo:* This struggle of the one person against another must also be seen as a struggle of the one ethnic group against another. The gulf between the different ethnicities within one country is usually wide. That makes political and social cooperation difficult. Thus the tradition of communalism must develop new, national and even pan-African forms.

*Haenen:* Here’s another Nyerere saying: “Talk till you have come to an agreement; that is the essence of traditional African democracy.” Here Nyerere points to the ancient African usage of “palaver.” This actually means more “to speak with each other” than “to talk with each other.”<sup>5</sup> After all a group discussion implies that people listen attentively to each other. Besides the arguments, motives and vested interested behind all the opinions , there is also the driving or moving force of the forms in which this takes place. In this mentality, the conviction that reality, i.e., the social and political reality, are formed by powers and KRACHTVELDEN. The palaver shows up in the process of arriving at a consensus. Thus a tense consensus.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>The Dutch verbs here are “spreek” and “praat.” I am not so sure my English translation carries the force of that distinction, nor whether this re-translation comes close to the original, which may have been either Swahili or English.

<sup>6</sup>Translator: I both describe and recommend consensus building as a viable traditional alternative to the raw forms of democracy that are found in so many African countries (Jan H. Boer, *Christians and Muslims: Parameters for Living together*. Studies in Christian-Muslim Relations, vol. 8-2, pp. 198-203 and Appendix 86. This series is

*Ong'ayo:* The recognition and naming of contrasts in politics is important for African relationships. But these must not be thought of in terms of ethnicities, for they go straight through each ethnicity and are socio-economic in nature.

*Is the rise of sages a form of dyke building?*<sup>7</sup>

*Haenen:* You could say that. Except that it is not about reaching a compromise so much as consensus. And what is more, it is less about the *contents* of that consensus than the *journey* to arrive there. Sages provide stimulation during the consultations with their insights. They do not judge or provide a clear cut product, for that is too static. Their influence tends to be more dynamic; it focuses on the process. If we want to compare it with endykement,<sup>8</sup> we may have to go much further back into history, to the Middle Ages, to the age of dyke building that would bring the nobles, the farmers and the middle class together in the construction of dykes. Cooperation was possible only by throwing the social contrasts overboard.

*Ong'ayo:* For African politics and democracy to be developed in a constitutional state, the creation of power in the middle class, the civil society, is important. From that quarter sufficient pressure can be exerted on politicians to keep national interests on the front burner.

*The subtitle of your book is "Plea for African Routes towards Independence." Are those African routes different from those in the West?*

*Haenen:* Definitely. We speak of democracy with great ease without realizing that it is the political end product of an extended civilizing and development process. Actually, our Western democracies are still very young and fresh. In most cases they are hardly a century old and have often gone through a process of rising and falling. You need only to think of the Weimar Republic, a democracy that existed a mere fifteen years. After

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published in both Canada and Nigeria, but in digital format it is right before you on the Islamica page of this website.

<sup>7</sup>Translator: The Dutch term here is "*polderen*," referring to the way the country is divided into areas each of which is surrounded by dykes to keep the water at bay.

<sup>8</sup>Translator: The term is my own neologism I use it to describe the Dutch *poldering* image used here in which a tract of land is reclaimed from a body of water by building a dyke around it.

that we had to wait sixteen years for the Federal Republic of Germany. The American President Wilson had an ideal: “to make the world safe for democracy.” It was on that basis that he intervened in WW I. This perspective still plays an important role in the background of American foreign policy and eclipses Churchill’s relativizing of democracy, which, he said, is the least evil of all political systems. The development of democracy has a good chance of success if you have the wind behind your economy, but when the wind goes against you, it becomes a different story. Just think of the fall of the Weimar Republic during the crisis of the 1930s. In our mindset, the democratic state is the only one possible, instead of the least evil. But when it comes to Africa, we must ask ourselves what it needs and what fits.

*Ong’ayo:* Give African nations the time and the room to develop their own political and social structures. The *principles* of a democratic constitutional state allow for such freedom. Western *application* of these principles do not determine the threshold.

*You cited a wise saying of Nyerere that Africans have no need to be taught democracy. Why not?*

*Haenan:* First of all because of the colonial past. The oppressed ask the oppressor: For which nation was your democracy a democracy? But also because Western democracies are tightly bound to the nation state, an arrangement that looks increasingly like a handicap. Just look at the problems facing the European Union. There is a deep discrepancy between economic and political power in Europe. The economy has international attraction, but it lacks governing or administrative instruments to solve internal problems. Just think about the paralyzing situation in Greece. Europe has for many years lacked adequate democratic renewal. There is little there for Africa to learn.

*What would be an African route towards democracy?*

*Haenen:* Democracy is not an exclusively political term. It can also refer to the formation of the social middle class, an active citizenry. This is an aspect of democracy that connects easily with the African communal

culture. One thing democracy is definitely not to be is imitation or copy of a European model. Imitation leads to superficial apparent equality. Put more strongly: An equality ideal imposed by the West via a democratic instrument is in a number of cases an economic continuation of the colonial situation. Democracy for Africa? To be sure, but not as an imitation of our model. But yes, if it means sharing of power, control over power and legal institutions, that which promotes the protection of the community and communal initiatives.

*Ong'ayo:* Nkrumah from Ghana and Odinga from Kenya have both in their own ways warned against various forms of neo-colonial oppression.<sup>9</sup> Economic and cultural imperialism are both examples. A completely different political reality can hide behind the façade of general elections. Certain elite groups within the African population are quite capable of developing a system of individual privilege. In order to achieve this they can surrender national economic interest to the global market structures for their own private interest or that of their own limited supporting constituency.

*Citizenry, middle class—it all sounds pretty Western.*

*Haenen:* The political contrast of progressive vs conservative looks very different in the African context. Do you want to make progress en route to independence? Then you have to start with a realistic point of departure. According to the wisdom teachers or sages, equality begins with the acknowledgement of inequality, in the sense of differences. You cannot simply without risk throw overboard the cultural traditions that have taken form over the course of centuries. The development of a culture is not like a coat that you just put on. You can achieve progress by utilizing your own social, religious and cultural strengths, not that of others nor by imitating the previous colonizer.

*African cultures have a strong focus on community, while the West is strongly oriented towards the individual: personal autonomy, personal*

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<sup>9</sup>Translator: I take the liberty to refer you to my own published writings on this subject, all found under the rubric "Economics and Politics" on the Boeriana page of this website.

*freedom, personal development, personal responsibility. What place does an individual have in the communal culture of Africa?*

*Haenen:* We Westerners think mostly in contrasts, as, e.g., individual vs collective, which is the reason it is difficult for us to imagine the role of an individual in Africa. The centrality of the subject in the West calls up its contrast, namely the collective. However, collectivism is also an extreme that swallows the individual.<sup>10</sup>

In the diverse variation of African thought patterns, community is the point of departure, the “we.” The “I” of the individual, however, is not contrary to the “we” but stands in its centre. Individuals have room *in* the community, even when they occupy a critical position and are especially tied to the community from the perspective of responsibility.

It is expected of sages and political leaders that they have a strong personality. Powerful individuals help advance the community. However, in the short term, they are above the immediate interests of their community, but are united with it as “socratic participants” who keep the long term in view.

*Ong’ayo:* Kenyan political leaders like Tom Mboya and Odinga have emphasized this larger community that is to be developed. They did not speak for the interests of the Luo, but for a form of rainbow nation, in which the various ethnicities would receive equal opportunities to develop. Though they came out of the culture and the community of the Luo, they looked beyond that community and sought to form a bridge. This issue is right now fully relevant, especially now that Uhuru Kenyatta, the son of Komo Kenyatta, the first president of Kenya, has become President. Cooperation with the son of Oginga Odinga, Raila Odinga, Minister President of the previous Kenyan government, is as difficult as it is

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<sup>10</sup>Bennie J. van der Walt is a South African reformational philosopher who has written extensively about this contrast in African vs Western anthropology. One of his publications is *Kultuur, Lewensvisie en Ontwikkeling:’n Ontmaskering van die gode van onderontwikkelde Afrika en die oorontwikkelde Weste* (Potchefstroom Universiteit vir Christelike Hoer Onderwys, 1999). For an extensive review of van der Walt from an African perspective, see Isaac N. Mutua, *A Critical Engagement with B. J. Van Der Walt’s Reformational Approach Towards African Culture And World View*. Dissertation submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts in Philosophy at the Potchefstroom Campus of the North-West University, South Africa, 2014. See the page Guest Articles of this website

necessary. It is our hope that Uhuru Kenyatta will keep his promise of promoting all of Kenya.

*What is the relationship between the community and property ownership, including clear borders of delineation?*

*Haenen:* Ground or property is literally the pillar undergirding African communalism. Ground brings you in contact with the community with whom you share the ground, as well as with the ancestors who at one time lived on that ground. According to Animism, which is deeply interwoven with African types of Christianity and Islam, spirits and spiritual power play an important role in the (spiritual) life. There is, for example, an opinion that the spirits of the dead live in the ground. For this reason sacrifices are offered to the ground, by means of which communication with the dead is sought. Ground creates social ties and therefore has loaded ethical meaning. That is the reason that in many African traditional cultures ground cannot be a private possession.

The sage Paul Mbuya Akoko, a member of the Luo ethnic group of which Barack Obama is also a descendent, posits that cooperation is the core element of ownership. You do not *share* possession, for then it would still be your property. You *borrow* property. You have the right to temporary usage on certain conditions, the most important of which is that it benefits the community. Akoko says, "When one person has a herd, everyone has by that fact (*"ipso facto"*) a herd." That *"ipso facto"* must be taken literally. The Luos' cattle were loaned to members of the community who otherwise would not have any and thus could not develop their lives. Anyone who had thus been helped at one time, would automatically feel obligated to loan his own properties to others. This is an African expression of the solidarity principle.

*Is there a connection with the relationships that African states used to have with Communism?*

*Haenen:* No, I don't think so. Communalism is essentially different from Communism. Communism does not create a relationship between ownership and borrow-to-use, between ownership and nature, between

ownership and ancestors. African ties with Communism during the Cold War were rather the result of resistance to the capitalism of the European countries that had colonized Africa.

*Why is Western colonialism still perceptible?*

*Haenen:* For years the West held two standards. On the one hand, there was a push for independence of African states and democratizing, but on the other, they would support dictators. Thus the West indirectly retained power and was able to pursue her imperial goals, but now organized in a more narrowly economic manner. As the French Minister of Foreign Affairs, Albert Sarault said already in 1923: "It is true that African colonization is legitimized with a civilizing and missionary mandate, but there was not a single intention to civilize." Colonization was a matter of force driven by pure economic interests.<sup>11</sup>

*Ong'ayo:* Even now African states make contracts with Western countries and multinationals that in the long run are unprofitable for them. The sage Oginga Odinga stated at the time of Kenya's independence in 1963, that the country had totally sold out to the British, so that already at the country's birth everything went amiss. For that matter, Africa must also try to deal with countries like China and India that have great interest in Africa in terms of the procurement of food for their immense populations and for whom Africa is an important market for their industrial products. The effective and publicly controllable negotiations with global partners is one of the most vital foci for the development of a promising African economy. A major precondition for this is openness on the part of government agencies and, on basis of that, purposeful cooperation with civil society.

*Modernization is the result of Enlightenment rationalization. Is it possible for Africa to retain her diversity of cultures? Think, for example, of the strong urbanization process. Will that not spell the end of the communal ties and oral tradition?*

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<sup>11</sup>Again, this is one of the main theses of my dissertation (1979) and its summary (1984). See the Boeriana page of this website. As to America, Dean Acheson, a former Secretary of State, admitted after the Korean War that it "was pursued mainly to increase domestic defense spending, a far cry from the public ideology of defending the "free world" (Jan H. Boer, *Caught in the Middle*, 1992, p. 58. See the Boeriana page of this website).

*Haenen:* Urbanization is indeed a problem for the retention of indigenous cultural orientation, especially in combination with widespread unemployment. The ties with the rural culture will weaken. However, modern media also make it possible to digitally protect valuable aspects of traditional culture, to document them and therewith conserve.

*Ong'ayo:*

In the fast growing suburbs of, e.g., Nairobi, besides the immense problems of youth unemployment and lack of perspective, we also see new forms of community emerge. These are not so much focused on illegal practices as is emphasized in the Western media, but rather on forms of informal economy. As I have researched among Ghanaian emigrants in the Netherlands, so can enterprising Africans in diaspora in general play an important role, both financially and organizationally, in the development of the society.

*Doesn't modernization in Africa not lead to secularization?*

*Haenen:* No, and that is a significant difference with the West. An African will not regard his spirituality as a burden. Thus he does not have to discard it. Atheism and secularization, at least as we know them in Europe, have little chance in Africa.

If we fear that globalization may lead to assimilation of cultures, we can rest assured. In the area of religion, Africans will always distinguish themselves from Europeans.