

An introduction to the political and social philosophy of the Kambata

Summary

According to the Kambata¹, there is no separation between politics, economics, culture or religion. All are functionally and teleologically² interdependent and demand the participation of all. As a consequence, there is no *professionalisation* of politics as it happens in the industrialised and “rationalised” positivistic modern societies. The basis of the Kambata political and social philosophy is that the human being is embedded in the community. There is no being and becoming outside community. As the being and becoming of the individual is dependent on the community every activity of the individual is a political activity. Nothing can explain this political and social philosophical attitude of the Kambata better than their proverbs and aphorisms. Through proverbs and aphorisms the Kambata transmit their cultural and political values and norms, maintain their traditions and instruct the younger generation.

“Human beings *become* human beings through fellow human beings” (*mannu manna ihanohu mannienet*)

This aphorism encompasses all realms of activities (political, economic, cultural) of those who belong together. This and many other aphorisms used during conversations and proverbs of the Kambata play a paramount role in the analysis since they convey the essential political and social philosophical concepts.

What is politics? I suppose various cultures have different concepts of politics. In the western or westernised world the creation of centralised authority, representative democracy, state-building, power monopoly, separation of legislative, executive and judiciary authorities, etc. led to the professionalisation of politics. At the same time or as a consequence, separation of politics from economics and culture began. This separation of economics and culture from politics is a phenomenon of modernisation. Through this modernisation politics began to be professionalized. This means politics became a profession like any other profession.

The concept of “politics” in the Kambata culture is apparently different. Since the Kambata culture is not that much penetrated by the western world, the term “politics” and its

¹ Kambata is located in the southern region of Ethiopia, bordered by Wolayta, Hadiya, Tambaro and Halaba. Scientists categorize the Kambata as highland east Cushitic ethnic group. The area where they live is about 1,040.39 km². In 2000 the total population was about 466,470, without including the Halaba and Tambaro. Most of the Kambata are agriculturalists. [Gebrewold-Tochalo, Belachew (2002), The impacts of the socio-cultural structures of the Kambata on their economic development, OEFSE: Vienna 2002, pp. 127ff]

² Teleology is a science or doctrine that attempts to explain the beings in terms of ends, final causes, design and purpose. The existence of the individual as well as of the community did not come to happen accidentally. The aim and meaning of human existence depend on the ultimate Designer.

modern concept are not common. This means it is neither accepted as it is nor translated into the Kambata language. This fact challenges research, at least at the first glance. However, if one understands the culture and the language of the Kambata it is not that difficult to discuss the concept of politics in this society.

According to the culture of the Kambata “politics” is a way of life. Culture, politics, economics are intermingled and cannot be separated. The concept of politics of the Kambata I would call *galtit*³. It is the abstract form of the verb *galu*. *Galu* literally means “to pass the night”. Literally, the abstract form *galtit* means “the state of passing the night”. There are some cosmological backgrounds to understand the analogy between passing the night and politics. Therefore, let us see the contexts in which the term *galu* or *galtit* are used.

During a ceremonial chanting which is called *gifata*⁴ those who dance sing a verse “*Kambata galtit tummando?*” (Kambata, is *galtit* peaceful, safe?), or “... *betto galtit tummando?*” (son of ... is *galtit* peaceful, safe?) In both cases *galtit* implies the state of the family, cattle, relatives, agricultural products, village, *hera* (cultural, religious, political entity) etc. This shows that politics, economics and culture are inseparably intermingled. Prosperity is possible only if there is peace, as a proverb says “*ollé tummin ozita itenno*” (lit. only if the village is peaceful, you can enjoy your meal, which means you can live in peace.)

Another very important concept of *galtit* in the political, economic and cultural context is when the Kambata pray, they very often use the sentence “*galtinne tumma àss, maasa’i*” (make our *galtita* peaceful, bless it). Especially the greetings in the morning convey this holistic (socio-political and economic) connotation. People greet in the morning instead of saying “good morning!” (wish) they greet “*tumma galtenta?*” “have you passed the night peacefully?” (interrogation). First, it is not taken for granted in a society surrounded by forest the dwellers of the village pass their night peacefully without an attack of wild animals. Secondly, it is during the night that thieves take advantage of darkness and perform their evil deeds. Thirdly, it is during the night that the evil spirits threaten the living. Hence, in the darkness the physical and psychological existence of man is threatened. This socio-psychological and physical state of the people is functionally connected with political state. Therefore, politics means a peaceful “passing of the night” materially and immaterially. Another point that emphasizes the similarity between the terminologies *politics* and *galtit* is

³ The main difficulty to do research on the Kambata and their culture is the lack of adequate data. I am confronted with this problem since I began to work on the political and social philosophy of the Kambata. In this essay I am trying to “extract” the concept of politics from the daily language of the Kambata. Since it is the first attempt to discuss and develop the concept scholarly I may be wrong by analysing some points. Therefore, I ask all Kambata scholars interested in this issue to do some research so that we can collect different views and perspectives and make a better analysis than mine only.

⁴ Cf. Yacob Arsano 2002, 54.

that politician is called *gashanchu* (the one who enables the passing of the night). It is derived from *gashu* – transitive verb – and means to enable to pass the night. Therefore, politician is the one who enables the peaceful passing of the night (literally as well as allegorically), not by making laws but only by executing the laws enacted by the people themselves.

Proverbs and aphorisms convey an essential political concept of the Kambata. The aphorism *mannu manna ihanohu mannienet*, for example, is one of the most important political aphorisms. The word “*ihanohu*” (“that it becomes” is derived from the verb *ihu* – “to become”) has a deep philosophical meaning. According to the Kambata a person is on the process of becoming as far as she is in the community. To exclude someone from the community (curse) means to stop her becoming. If the intensity of the life of the community decreases, the “humanness” of the human being decreases too. As Sundermeier witnesses, exactly the same aphorism is to be found in the Zulu language.⁵ In the communitarian language this can be called “self-interpretation”. Commenting on the idea of Taylor, Mulhall and Swift say the following: “...I can define who I am only by defining my relations to other selves, by establishing where I speak from in the family tree, in social space, in my intimate relations to the ones I love, and so on.”⁶

As Aristotle⁷ in his *Politics* says, “the individual, when isolated, is not self-sufficing. But he who is unable to live in society, or who has no need because he is sufficient for himself, must be either a beast or a god”⁸. This is the centrepiece in the socio-political education of the Kambata. Children who look lonely or play alone are told to play with other children. To play alone means to be possessed by gods or by evil spirits. Moreover, one of the aims of circumcision in the Kambata culture is to make the neophyte a part of the mature community, to protect him/her from the gods or evil spirits, since a person is human being only among human beings.

The following are two very important reasons to remain always in the community: First, if an adult does not talk and share his situation with the community, it is very suspicious. He/she might be possessed by evil spirits or become a witch doctor. Reserved and quiet children are sometimes even beaten by their parents so that they play with other children. Those who are not active in the group do not belong to the community of normal

⁵ Cf. Nur gemeinsam können wir überleben (Gütersloh 1988) 208;

⁶ Stephen Mulhall and Adam Swift, *Liberals and communitarians* (Oxford/Cambridge 1992) 110f;

⁷ The aim of this comparative analysis between western and Kambata philosophy is neither to stress on the similarities and to render Kambata culture something coequal to the western philosophy; nor to emphasize on the differences between these two cultures and boast on the peculiarity of the Kambata culture. The relevance of the comparison is first, its significance for scientific analysis, and second, any intercultural dialogue presupposes the knowledge of similarities as well as differences.

⁸ Aristotle, *Politics*, Book I, Chapter 2;

human beings. This "normality" is very important. Somebody who "juts out" and who is unique is suspicious and not "normal". Second, only in the community one can learn the norms, values, prescriptions, etc. of the society, the history of the lineage and clan, how many relatives one has and so on. Therefore, community is the school of the society. The younger ones should listen to what the elders say and share their experiences among each other.⁹ That means there is not a "ready-made" human being. He/she has to be made a human being through his fellow human beings. According to the Kambata, the economic, political and social dependence of the individual is not its limitation but the means for its development and self-realisation.

One can observe a parallel between Rousseau's concept of social order as a sacred right and the basis of all rights¹⁰ and the Kambata's concept of social order. The social order of the Kambata is the law that guarantees the existence of the society in general and of the individual in particular. This is substantiated by a proverb: *maganu fadisiga, mannu minisiga* (a god acts and is adored according to his traditions, a people acts according to its customs/culture); or *chi'at baadisiga wodda'i* (birds chirp according to their area). Moreover, this concept corroborates the rejection of elitism and professionalisation of politics. These proverbs are usually used by elderly people when confronted by modernism, rationalism and socio-economic liberalism and cultural relativism, which are being introduced by their children. Like for Rousseau, for the Kambata there is no other way of preserving themselves "than the formation, by aggregation, of a sum of forces..."¹¹

However, even if it seems to be the only socio-economic and political ideology, communitarianism of the Kambata does not completely supersede individual interests. Actually, the preservation of the person and goods of the individual are the implicit but ultimate end. This can be illustrated by expressions such as *machat ba'oi* (literally: the ear disappears, ceases to exist), *su'mu bao* (lit. the name disappears, ceases to exist). If we take the first expression, a person exists as long as he/she is accepted by the community, as long as the community does not say bad things about him/her. There is no existence outside of the community. The message that emanates from the community and that goes into the ear of the individual constitutes the existence of the individual. In the second expression the same message is conveyed. If something bad is said about a person, the name ceases to exist; the name means the person itself. Therefore, the becoming and being of the individual is the ultimate goal, not the community as such. Here, there is an interesting parallel between

⁹ Cf. Nur gemeinsam können wir überleben (Gütersloh 1988) 208;

¹⁰ Cf. Rousseau, Social Contract, Book 1, Chapter 1.

¹¹ Cf. Ibid., Chapter 6.

Rousseau and the Kambata. Rousseau says "...each man, in giving himself to all, gives himself to nobody...he gains an equivalent for everything he loses..."¹² As Rousseau says the moral and collective body is constituted by its common identity based not only on culture, but also on territory. That is why in the language of the Kambata territorial area (*badu*) and people (*mannu*) are interchangeable: *Mannu* (people) can mean *badu* (territory, people). For example, *mannu ma yano* and *badu ma yano* mean the same thing: "what would the people say". These people are the law makers. According to the Kambata there is no any individual that makes laws. The tradition of the people is the law. In case of violation of any cultural values they say "annakanne/kambati woga ba'isot" (don't violate the tradition of our fathers/of the Kambata.), since they are what they are because of this tradition. "[Men] would have to be before law what they should become by means of law".¹³

Galtit/politics (a peaceful passing of the night) is essentially dependent on the concept of justice. In case of dispute there is a very common admonition, a kind of categorical imperative: "manni gàrita baisot", or "manni garén higgot", or just "higissot". All three mean: don't violate the right of the others. As Aristotle says, "justice is the bond of men..., for the administration of justice is the principle of order in political society."¹⁴ Justice in the Kambata language means *garit*. It is derived from the verb *garu*: a) to be first in competition; b) to possess, gain truth in dispute. However, *garit* has three meanings: a) truth; b) justice; c) right (such as human right). The above expressions of the Kambata about justice which we can call Kantian deontology are pre-contractual rights of the individual. The categorical imperative "manni garen higgot" (lit. don't cross the right of the others) denotes that the rights of each individual, independent of his/her social class, are demarcated and have to be respected. The second categorical imperative "manni gàrita ba'isot" (lit. don't annihilate the right of the others) conveys that to violate one's rights means to annihilate the person itself. The last categorical imperative "higissot" means don't extend the limit of your rights. As these categorical imperatives show us the fact that truth, human right and justice have the same etymological root is not accidental. As it is in the Kantian language, an action is truthful if one acts by keeping in mind that his maxim can be applied as a universal law (human right) and nobody is used by others as mere means (the law of justice)¹⁵.

The political understanding of the Kambata does not deny that the individual interests, and along with them, the desire for glory and the propensity to revenge and competition are

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 7.

¹⁴ Aristotle, *Politics*, Book I, Chapter 2;

¹⁵ Cf. <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/03432a.htm> (18/09/2003)

real. Even the Kantian categorical imperative, “act only on that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law”¹⁶, is an indirect concession to the danger of revenge, emulation and competition. A good example for this is the proverb “*sagadan mugga’ en sharreema, gorrichon biza’i sharrano*” (lit. the one you chase downhill will chase you uphill). This means, if you persecute someone slightly, he/she will persecute you strongly when he/she has a better opportunity. Therefore, it is on one’s own interest to materialise the categorical imperative. The Kambata culture admits that both competition and cooperation are real and coexistent. There is competition, because there is mutual dependence. There is cooperation because an unbridled competition destroys the society.

The above proverb reminds us the danger discussed by Hobbes in his Leviathan. “...Kings whose power is greatest, turn their endeavours to the assuring it at home by laws, or abroad by wars: and when that is done, there succeeds a new desire; in some, of fame from new conquest; of others, ease and sensual pleasure; in others, of admiration, or being flattered for excellence in some art, or other ability of the mind”¹⁷ Hobbes says further, “for as to the strength, the weakest has strength enough to kill the strongest, either by secret machination, or by confederacy with others, that are in the same danger with himself.”¹⁸

Like for Hobbes, many proverbs of the Kambata show us the life of the community does not eradicate mutual mistrust. A similar proverb like the above one says, “*angata afeen ke’iseema makkita aff uujano*” (lit. the one you raise up by holding his hands, will throw you down by holding your right hand). These two proverbs convey two fundamental messages: you can never trust the others, and all people are formally equal. That means, inequality is just something temporary and accidental. The oppressed and poor are potential masters of the society, and they will materialise it one day. Therefore, everybody has to be on his guard.

The proverb of the Kambata, *butichi lallabuha burzami gequha* (nobody pays attention to the speech of a poor man; nobody is afraid of the glare of a man with cataract), expresses that, to be is to have. That means, poverty has two socio-political effects: 1) poor people are concerned exclusively with the acquisition of their basic necessities; consequently, 2) they have not yet developed intellectual capabilities to grasp and analyse public affairs and to express their political rights. Therefore, they cannot make any demand for universal and reciprocal moral rights.

Especially in the former times social esteem was directly proportional to land possession. Land is not only a means of production, it is also a means of social esteem and

¹⁶ Hans Joachim Störig, *Kleine Weltgeschichte der Philosophie* (Frankfurt/Main 1998) 412

¹⁷ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* ed. by Richard Truck (Cambridge 2000) 70;

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 87;

honour. The Kambata have an interrogative proverb which says, "*yo'ihundo rehe'ihu bata'ano?*" which means "is the number of the living or dead greater?" And the answer is, "*zazzalanchu bargi, rehe'ihu bata'ano*" which means, "including merchants, the number of the dead is greater." What is the background of this socio-economic philosophy?

- in former times, a merchant did not possess land,
- he/she was the one who wandered from one market to the other, and consequently who lived separated from his family for a long period of time,
- he/she was a “liar” who did not tell the real value and quality of his goods. He had to lie so as to attribute an “unreal” value to his goods and to make profit, because trade was the only means of his economic survival.

Consequently, a merchant lives an uncertain economic life without social esteem, unlike those who possess land. Therefore, the Kambata consider (considered) this way of life as death. The social despicability of such an economic sector is based on this socio-economic philosophy.

As we have seen so far the proverbs of the Kambata are embroidered by analogies. It is this analogy that underpins the significance and the message of the proverbs. For example, analogies taken from nature substantiate the proverbs and easily convince the audience by construing the proverbs as a universal law. Hence, if a speech is well substantiated by proverbs it is moral and legitimate. For example the proverb "*woaha womaha lagennoba'a*" which means, *there is neither bad King nor bad water*, (the former is the symbol of social order and the latter is the symbol of life) implies the sacro-sanctity of a King. Most of the proverbs show us an interesting psychology of the inventor of the proverbs. For example, in the case of the above proverb, the inventor - most probably a kingly clan - juxtaposes itself with water. That means, it makes itself as important as water. This shows us that most of the proverbs are invented by certain classes to substantiate their political positions and class interests.

Conclusion

In this short analysis of the political and social philosophy of the Kambata I have tried to compare the political and social philosophy of some Western philosophers and that of the Kambata for the sake of explanation. This does not, however, mean that both philosophies are the same. For example, in the Aristotelian case virtue can be developed within the community, and no one is sufficient for himself unless it is a beast or a god. Moreover, he stresses that state is prior to the individual. These concepts are parallel to the aphorism of the

Kambata *mannu manna ihanohu manninet* (see above). All citizens as community determine politics. Moreover, politics, economics and religion are essentially interdependent. As a consequence, any professionalisation of these branches is forestalled. Therefore, any universalisation of socio-cultural values such as professionalisation of politics is rejected.

Whereas Aristotle essentialises or ontologises the inferiority of slaves or women, according to the Kambata – at least covertly – the inferiority of some classes is just a social construct¹⁹. Nevertheless, in this context, the concept of human being in the culture of the Kambata is paradoxical: on the one hand, “human beings becomes human beings through fellow human beings”; on the other hand, some groups like potters, tanners, slaves, the poor etc. are consider as inferior, which contradicts their categorical imperative of justice, truth and human rights.

When we compare and analyse different proverbs and aphorisms, we can conclude that some proverbs and aphorisms contradict each other. Even the aphorism *mannu manna ihanohu manninet* (the human being becomes human being through fellow human beings) does not necessarily prioritise the community to the individual. Community is not the goal in itself, rather a means for the individual self-realisation within the community. The nature of the community is to make a better individual.

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¹⁹ Cf. the proverb *butichi lallabuha burzami gequha*.