

The Enduring Resonance: Kenneth Kaunda's Humanism in Contemporary Zambia Politics

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ABSTRACT

This study critically examines the enduring relevance and practical application of Kenneth Kaunda's philosophy of Zambian Humanism within the contemporary political landscape of Zambia. Developed as a guiding ideology for post-independence nation-building, Humanism emphasized moral leadership, social justice, communal welfare, and self-reliance. Through an analysis of current governance practices, socio-economic trends, and public discourse, this research investigates the extent to which these foundational tenets continue to resonate or have been diluted amidst prevailing neoliberal economic reforms, persistent corruption, and widening socio-economic inequality. The findings reveal a complex interplay between the symbolic legacy of Humanism and its often-compromised practical implementation, highlighting a significant disconnect between ethical ideals and political realities. Despite these challenges, the study concludes that Kaunda's vision remains a significant touchstone for national identity and a source of inspiration, offering a framework for re-aligning contemporary governance with principles of equity and collective well-being.

Keywords: Kenneth Kaunda, Zambian Humanism, Contemporary Politics, Social Justice, Moral Leadership, Neoliberalism, Corruption, Zambia.

INTRODUCTION

The post-colonial African continent witnessed the emergence of various ideologies aimed at guiding newly independent nations towards self-determination, development, and social cohesion [1]. Among these, Kenneth Kaunda's philosophy of Zambian Humanism stands out as a unique and influential attempt to forge a distinct national identity and a moral compass for governance in Zambia [7]. Introduced shortly after Zambia gained independence in 1964, Humanism was conceived as an indigenous African philosophy, deeply rooted in traditional African values of communalism, mutual respect, and human dignity, while also embracing elements of Christian ethics and socialist principles [13, 24]. Kaunda articulated Humanism as a rejection of both Western capitalism and Eastern communism, proposing a "man-centered society" where the well-being of the individual within the community was paramount [8, 16].

For decades, Zambian Humanism served as the official state ideology, influencing policy decisions across various sectors,

including education, healthcare, and economic development, particularly through the promotion of cooperatives and state-led enterprises [11]. Its core tenets emphasized moral leadership, social justice, equitable distribution of wealth, self-reliance, and a commitment to the welfare of all citizens [12, 15]. However, with the shift towards multi-party democracy in the early 1990s and the subsequent adoption of neoliberal economic policies, questions have arisen regarding the continued relevance and practical application of Kaunda's Humanism in contemporary Zambian politics [14, 33]. The nation has grappled with persistent challenges such as corruption, widening socio-economic inequality, and the erosion of public services, leading many to ponder whether the ideals of Humanism have become mere historical echoes or if they still hold tangible influence [12, 22].

This study aims to critically examine the enduring resonance of Kenneth Kaunda's Humanism in contemporary Zambian politics. It seeks to explore the extent to which its foundational principles are reflected in current governance practices, public discourse, and the

lived experiences of Zambian citizens. By analyzing the interplay between historical ideology and present-day political realities, this research endeavors to ascertain whether Humanism remains a guiding force, a symbolic relic, or a source of inspiration for future political trajectories in Zambia.

Literature Review

The concept of African Humanism, often encapsulated in philosophies like Ubuntu (Southern Africa) and Omolúwàbí (Yoruba), posits a worldview where human interconnectedness, communal well-being, and ethical conduct are central [6, 18]. These philosophies emphasize the idea that an individual's humanity is intrinsically linked to their relationships with others and their community [10, 23]. Kenneth Kaunda's Zambian Humanism drew heavily from these broader African ethical traditions, adapting them to the specific context of a newly independent nation striving for unity and development [1, 9, 13]. DeRoche (2023) provides a comprehensive overview of Kaunda's life and his philosophical contributions, situating Humanism within the broader narrative of African liberation and nation-building [7, 30].

Kaunda's Humanism, as articulated in works like *A Humanist in Africa* (1966) and his early speeches, was not merely an academic exercise but a practical guide for governance [15, 16, 17]. He envisioned a society free from exploitation, where resources were shared equitably, and every individual had the opportunity to flourish [8, 16]. Early policy implementations under Kaunda's leadership, such as the promotion of agricultural cooperatives, were direct manifestations of Humanist principles aimed at fostering self-reliance and communal prosperity [11]. Mboyonga (2024) further highlights Humanism's role in shaping higher education for social responsibility during the post-colonial period (1964-1991), demonstrating its pervasive influence across sectors [21].

However, the transition to multi-party democracy in 1991 and the subsequent embrace of structural adjustment programs and neoliberal economic reforms marked a significant departure from the state-centric, welfare-oriented policies of the Humanist era [14, 29]. Critics argue that these reforms prioritized market forces over social welfare, leading to increased inequality, privatization of public services, and a weakening of the state's role in ensuring social justice [12, 22]. The rise of corruption within political structures has further exacerbated these challenges, creating a perceived disconnect between the ethical ideals of Humanism and the realities of governance [12, 22]. Mooney (2024) specifically explores the "spaces between idealism and reality" in Kaunda's Humanism during this period [22].

Despite these shifts, the legacy of Kenneth Kaunda and his Humanism continues to resonate in Zambia's collective memory [3]. Chama and Simataa (2024) explore how Kaunda is remembered, suggesting that his vision of moral leadership and social justice remains a significant cultural and political touchstone, even if its practical application has diminished [3]. Mbewe, Hinfelaar, and Money (2023) also delve into Kaunda's enduring legacies in Southern Africa, indicating that his ideas, though challenged, are not entirely forgotten [20]. The principle of "One Zambia, One Nation," a core tenet of Humanism, continues to be invoked as a symbol of national unity [27]. The tension between the enduring symbolic value of Humanism and its compromised practical application in the face of contemporary political and economic realities forms the core of this investigation. This study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of this tension, exploring whether Humanism is merely an echo of the past or if it still holds the potential to inform and inspire contemporary Zambian politics.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research approach to explore the complex and nuanced interplay between Kenneth Kaunda's Humanism and contemporary Zambian politics. This approach was deemed most appropriate for delving into the subjective interpretations, historical legacies, and evolving perceptions of a political philosophy within a dynamic socio-political context [5, 19].

Research Design A critical interpretive research design was utilized, focusing on in-depth understanding and interpretation rather than statistical generalization [19]. This design allowed for the exploration of themes, patterns, and meanings related to Humanism's contemporary relevance through the analysis of various forms of data.

Data Sources and Sampling The study drew upon multiple data sources to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. These included:

- **Archival Documents:** Speeches by Kenneth Kaunda (e.g., [15, 17]), policy documents from the Humanist era, and historical analyses of Zambian politics, including his addresses to the Zambian National Assembly [11, 12, 28].
- **Contemporary Political Discourse:** Analysis of speeches by current political leaders, policy statements, legislative debates, and media reports related to governance, social justice, and

economic development in Zambia. This included discussions on political transition and policy change [29].

- **Academic Literature:** Scholarly articles and books discussing Zambian politics, African humanism, and the legacy of Kenneth Kaunda [1, 3, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 13, 14, 18, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 30, 31, 32, 34].
- **Public Opinion (Indirect):** Examination of reports from civil society organizations, think tanks, and public commentaries that reflect societal concerns regarding corruption, inequality, and public services, as well as analyses of Kaunda's legacy and shadow [26].

Purposive sampling was used to select relevant documents and discourse for analysis, prioritizing sources that directly addressed or implicitly reflected the principles of Humanism or the challenges facing contemporary Zambian politics.

Data Collection Procedure Data collection involved systematic retrieval and review of the identified documents and discourse materials. Archival materials were accessed through online repositories and historical databases. Contemporary political discourse was gathered from official government websites, parliamentary records, and reputable news archives. Academic literature was sourced from scholarly databases. Data collection was an iterative process, with initial findings guiding the search for further relevant materials.

Data Analysis The collected data were subjected to thematic analysis, following the rigorous guidelines proposed by Braun and Clarke (2022) [2]. This involved:

1. **Familiarization with Data:** Reading and re-reading the entire dataset to gain a deep understanding of the content.
2. **Generating Initial Codes:** Identifying interesting features across the dataset and coding them systematically.
3. **Searching for Themes:** Collating codes into potential themes, looking for broader patterns of meaning.
4. **Reviewing Themes:** Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts and the entire dataset, and refining them.
5. **Defining and Naming Themes:** Developing a detailed analysis of each theme, identifying its essence and scope.
6. **Producing the Report:** Weaving together the analytical narrative with compelling examples from the data.

The analysis focused on identifying explicit and implicit references to Humanist principles, examining how

contemporary political actors and societal issues align with or deviate from these ideals, and understanding the perceived impact of neoliberal reforms and corruption on the practical application of Humanism. The research methods in education by Cohen et al. (2018) and qualitative inquiry by Creswell & Poth (2018) also informed the general approach to qualitative data handling [4, 5].

RESULTS

The thematic analysis revealed several key findings regarding the presence and nature of Kenneth Kaunda's Humanism in contemporary Zambian politics. These findings illuminate both the enduring symbolic power of the ideology and the significant challenges to its practical implementation.

Symbolic Reverence and Historical Acknowledgment

A prominent theme across political discourse and public commentary is the continued symbolic reverence for Kenneth Kaunda and, by extension, his philosophy of Humanism. Political leaders, in various speeches and national addresses, frequently invoke Kaunda's name and his ideals, particularly during national commemorative events or when discussing issues of national unity and historical identity [3, 20, 25, 29, 30, 31, 34]. Humanism is often presented as the foundational ideology of the Zambian state, a source of national pride and a reminder of the nation's post-independence aspirations for self-determination and social justice [7, 25, 30]. The principle of 'One Zambia, One Nation' remains a powerful symbol of national cohesion [27]. This symbolic acknowledgment, however, often appears decoupled from concrete policy commitments or practical application in daily governance.

Disconnect Between Ideals and Realities A significant finding is the observable disconnect between the ethical ideals promoted by Kaunda's Humanism and the current realities of governance in Zambia. The core Humanist tenets of communal welfare, social justice, and equitable resource distribution appear deeply compromised by prevailing socio-economic conditions.

- **Neoliberal Economic Reforms:** The shift towards neoliberal economic policies, characterized by privatization, deregulation, and reduced state spending on social services, has demonstrably led to increased socio-economic inequality [14, 29]. Public services, such as healthcare and education, which were central to Kaunda's Humanist vision, have faced significant

challenges, with access often determined by economic status rather than universal right. Mooney (2024) specifically highlights the "spaces between idealism and reality" in this context [22].

- **Corruption:** The pervasive issue of corruption in various sectors of government and public life stands in stark contrast to Humanism's emphasis on moral leadership and integrity [12, 14, 26]. Instances of embezzlement, illicit enrichment, and lack of accountability undermine public trust and divert resources away from communal welfare, directly contradicting the humanist principle of serving the common good.
- **Erosion of Public Services:** The analysis revealed widespread public dissatisfaction with the quality and accessibility of public services. This erosion is perceived by many as a direct consequence of policies that diverge from the Humanist commitment to providing for the basic needs of all citizens.

Humanism as a Touchstone for Critique and Aspiration

Despite its compromised practical application, Humanism continues to serve as a critical touchstone for public discourse and a source of aspiration for a better Zambia. Civil society organizations, academics, and segments of the public frequently invoke Humanist principles to critique current government policies and practices that are perceived as unjust or inequitable [21, 26]. When discussing issues of poverty, unemployment, or lack of access to essential services, there is often an implicit or explicit comparison to the ideals of Humanism, highlighting what many believe Zambia *should* be. This suggests that while not actively implemented, the values embedded in Humanism remain deeply ingrained in the national consciousness as a benchmark for good governance and social responsibility [3].

Tensions Between Ethical Idealism and Political Realism

The study also identified significant tensions between the ethical idealism of Humanism and the political realism necessitated by global economic pressures and domestic political dynamics. Political actors often face the challenge of balancing the popular appeal of Humanist rhetoric with the demands of international financial institutions and the realities of a competitive global economy. This tension frequently results in policies that prioritize economic growth (often through neoliberal means) over direct social welfare, leading to a pragmatic but often ethically challenging compromise. Mooney (2024) provides a detailed exploration of these tensions [22].

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal a complex and often contradictory relationship between Kenneth Kaunda's Humanism and contemporary Zambian politics. While the ideology retains a significant symbolic presence and serves as a historical and moral anchor for national identity, its practical application has been profoundly challenged by a confluence of factors, most notably neoliberal economic reforms, pervasive corruption, and the resulting socio-economic inequality. This echoes the broader post-colonial experience in many African nations where foundational ideologies have struggled to adapt to changing global and domestic pressures [1, 29].

The observed disconnect between Humanist ideals and current realities is particularly stark in the economic sphere. Kaunda's vision of a "man-centered society" and equitable resource distribution stands in sharp contrast to the outcomes of market-driven policies that have, in many instances, exacerbated social stratification and poverty [14, 22]. The erosion of public services, once a hallmark of Humanist commitment to social welfare, further highlights this divergence. This situation is not unique to Zambia, as many developing nations have faced similar pressures from international financial institutions to adopt austerity measures and free-market principles, often at the expense of social protection [12, 29].

Furthermore, the pervasive issue of corruption directly undermines the moral fabric that Humanism sought to instill in governance. Kaunda's emphasis on moral leadership and integrity, as articulated in his early speeches and writings [15, 16, 17], seems to have been significantly eroded in a political environment where accountability is often lacking and public resources are diverted for private gain [12, 14, 26]. This erosion of ethical standards not only betrays the core tenets of Humanism but also diminishes public trust in institutions, hindering effective governance and development.

Despite these challenges, the study's finding that Humanism remains a touchstone for critique and aspiration is highly significant. It suggests that the values of social justice, communal welfare, and moral leadership are not obsolete in the Zambian consciousness. Instead, they provide a framework through which citizens and civil society can evaluate and challenge current political practices [21]. This enduring resonance, as explored by Chama and Simataa (2024) regarding Kaunda's collective memory [3], indicates that Humanism, while not actively implemented as a state ideology, continues to shape normative expectations for governance. This creates a fertile ground for advocating for policies that are more aligned with equitable and inclusive development. The

tension between ethical idealism and political realism is a constant struggle, but the continued invocation of Humanist principles provides a moral leverage point for those advocating for a more just society [22].

6. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that while Kaunda's humanism still holds significant symbolic value, its practical application in contemporary Zambia has been deeply compromised, particularly with neoliberal economic reforms, corruption, and socio-economic inequality [12, 14]. The findings reveal a disconnect between the ethical ideals Kaunda promoted [15, 16, 17] and the current realities of governance in Zambia.

However, this study also highlights that Kaunda's vision of moral leadership, social justice, and communal welfare is not entirely obsolete. It remains a touchstone for national identity and a source of inspiration [3, 20, 25, 29, 30, 31, 34], despite being inadequately embedded in institutional governance. The tensions between ethical idealism and political realism persist, particularly in light of Zambia's ongoing challenges with corruption, inequality, and the erosion of public services.

Overall, the study highlights the enduring significance of Kaunda's humanism and offers concrete policy interventions that could help re-align Zambia's governance with the ideals of moral leadership, social justice, and communal welfare. Although challenged by neoliberal reforms, this approach ensures that Kaunda's vision can still inform and inspire contemporary political practices in Zambia.

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