

## TRACING BERNARD MATOLINO'S BASIS FOR A NEW AFRO-COMMUNITARIAN POLITICAL THEORY OF DEMOCRACY

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### Introduction

Bernard Matolino is one of the outstanding philosophers who left an indelible mark on the development of African philosophy. In his philosophical works, Matolino has mainly focused on the idea of personhood in African philosophy, a critique of (African) communitarianism, a critique of ubuntu as a form of communitarianism, democracy and consensus in Africa, rights in African communitarianism, among other areas of philosophy. Although Matolino has made significant contributions in the area of African metaphysics, especially the concept of personhood, this appears to be a preparation for his current focus on African political theory, which various forms of the African experience have triggered. The African experience includes such problems as injustice, racism (racialism), same-sex unions, xenophobia and democracy in Africa.

Experiences of this sort have led Matolino to shift from what his readers have ordinarily known him as an ardent critic of African philosophical speculations to a philosopher who now takes the plight of African people as the focus of his critical analyses. This is evident in his current focus on democracy as a political theory, which has important ramifications for the lives of Africans. However, what I have said as a shift in Matolino's philosophy is not actually a shift in the strictest sense. It is an important suggestion he made in his doctoral thesis concerning the need to develop African political philosophy. For Matolino, that political philosophy would engage genuine African

realities, whether negative or positive. Eventually, this would take care of the genuine needs of Africans on the continent.

The aim of this short article is to trace the development of Matolino's basis for a new Afro-communitarian political theory of democracy. Although his work has primarily been confined to the domain of metaphysics, arguably the central nerve of any philosophical enterprise, Matolino's present focus is in African political philosophy. To some, this may appear a complete departure from what Matolino is known for. However, I argue that this transition is not abrupt, but has been carefully calculated and laid down in his Doctoral thesis. Hence, my focus is on tracing Matolino's basis of his new afro-communitarian political theory of democracy through his transition from Metaphysics to Political theory.

### **Matolino's contribution to African Metaphysics**

In earnest, Matolino's unique way of philosophical enquiry starts to take shape with his engagement with the metaphysics of a person from African philosophy point of view. In the philosophical domain, metaphysics is supposed to be a prerequisite for any philosopher who wants to make a meaningful philosophical journey. This is specifically contained in Matolino's doctoral thesis completed at the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal. Titled *The Concept of Person in African Political Philosophy: An Analytical and Evaluative Study*, Matolino sought to interrogate both the communitarian conception of personhood and the resultant political ideology of African socialism. In his argument, the major driving factor behind the development of the communitarian view and African socialism arises from what he calls an inordinate desire to show that the African reality is different from others such as the European or American. He traces this problem from Placide Tempels' work on *Bantu Philosophy* (1959), which Matolino labels a "futile search for an African ontology [that] has been perpetuated by all communitarians and African socialists". In that work, Tempels conceives the individual as essentially a relational being. Accordingly, Matolino has summarised the objective of this doctoral research as "a philosophical critique of African communitarianism and the resultant socialism" or an investigation of the "concept of person in African philosophy and how this concept is used in the construction of African socialism" (MATOLINO 2008, 1). After engaging Tempels, Matolino continues with the examination of African Communitarianism

through the works of John Mbiti (1970), Ifeanyi Menkiti (1984) and Kwame Gyekye (1997).

Matolino's thesis then goes on to engage with what can be considered the consequences of the communitarian concept of the individual. This is done by examining the works of Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere and Leopold Senghor, who are regarded as the fathers of post-colonial dispensation in Africa. These philosophers *cum* political leaders generally proposed reconsidering the traditional view of man from which a relevant African political theory would emerge. Such a political theory would, in turn, become the backbone of political and social development in the post-colonial states of independent Africa. Matolino thinks post-colonial leaders erroneously believed that there is a certain essence of the African personality and society. In addition, Matolino is generally critical of the communitarian view of a person. Such a critique follows from the vagueness that Matolino identifies when, for instance, Menkiti collapses together the ontological questions of the status of personhood with moral achievement, ageing and observance of rituals. Above all, Matolino is bemused with how the search for the African difference has exaggerated the prominence of the African communitarian view.

From this momentous study, Matolino has identified two ways of articulating the concept of person: communitarian (normative) and the metaphysical. He suggests that philosophers should try to determine the plausibility of these two conceptions while highlighting the complementary and contradictory features of these perspectives. Beyond this recommendation, Matolino suggests further studies on a political theory within the African context that should go beyond the claims and aims of African socialism. In his argument, it is important to develop African political philosophy that is informed by various problems that typical African persons face in their day-to-day life experiences without essentialising them. For Matolino, some of those problems range from “megalomaniacs, small-time dictators, delusional dictators, misguided socialist experiments, one-man rule and ideologies, pseudo democracies, and pure banditry [which] have characterised African rule in the past and continue to be present today” (MATOLINO 2019, 1).

Matolino's discussion of personhood continued in his 2014 monograph titled, *Personhood in African Philosophy*, where he

discussed the normative (communitarian) and the metaphysical conceptions of personhood. Within the normative conception of personhood, he engages the three theses on personhood identified by the Malawian Philosopher Didier N. Kaphagawani. These are, the force thesis, which he associates with Placide Tempels, the shadow thesis that he attributes to Alexis Kagame; and the communalist thesis, which he associates with John Mbiti (MATOLINO 2014, 3-4). Matolino believes that this characterisation of personhood is not entirely correct. First, he argues that this characterisation is not limited to West Africa, and it is not metaphysical but normative. Thus, as espoused in Tempels Bantu Philosophy, personhood is normative or ethical since living an ethical life eventually enables one to earn his/her status in the community as a person. Second, Matolino is critical of the communitarian thesis because it puts the individual “under a permanent injunction to behave in a manner that is beneficial to the community of forces” (MATOLINO 2014, 44). In fact, the community is both a “social fact” and a “constitutive identity” of the individual (MATOLINO 2014, 46). This perspective on the individual is common among many African philosophers.

Later, Matolino discusses the metaphysical conception of a person based on the Yoruba and Akan schemes. In Yoruba philosophical thought, the concept of *eniyán* (person, in the strict metaphysical sense) contrasts with *omoluwabi* (person, in the strict ethical or normative sense). In the strict metaphysical sense, an individual possesses spiritual and physical attributes even though some body parts are also said to perform spiritual roles, for example, *okan* (heart) and *ori* (head/destiny) (MATOLINO 2014, 85).

Another reason Matolino is very critical of communitarianism as the authentic African perspective on personhood is that many educated Africans like him who do not live in rural, traditional communities cannot, in earnest, claim to possess knowledge of intricate communitarian values. Besides, communitarianism relies heavily on anachronistic or obsolete practices not suited to the present conditions (MATOLINO 2014, 120, 134). Matolino also rejects communitarianism based on what he identifies as a category mistake, which construes a person as a moral agent conceived in the communitarian set-up as entailing a person as an ontological entity (MATOLINO 2014, 143).

As early as 2013, Matolino's critical orientation in philosophy became more pronounced through the publication of his controversial, thought-provoking and arguably most cited paper titled *The end of Ubuntu*, co-authored with Wenceslaus Kwindiwi. Matolino and Kwindiwi were spurred by what they claimed to be concerted efforts by other scholars aimed at reviving the notion of ubuntu since the advent of democracy in South Africa. Thus, in its various formulations, Ubuntu is considered as "the authentic African ethical concept, a way of life, an authentic mode of being African, an individual ideal, the appropriate public spirit, a definition of life itself and the preferred manner of conducting public and private business" (MATOLINO & KWINDINGWI 2013, 197). The authors argued that the aggressive promotion of ubuntu, as a narrative of return, became essentially an elitist project conceived and meant to benefit the emerging new elite. However, such attempts have always resulted in public social and political failure. In addition, there is also disjunct "between the metaphysical conditions necessary for the attainment of ubuntu and the stark ontological and ethical crisis facing the new elite and 'our people'" (MATOLINO & KWINDINGWI 2013, 197). In addition, the traditional communities in which ubuntu was practised, are notorious for their dislike for outsiders, intolerance towards divergent ideas and placing a high price and value on blood relations in recognising the other. What this means is that commitment to the values of ubuntu is effectively the exclusion of other values. That is, there is nothing ethically promising about ubuntu for today's society apart from the difference it emphasises.

Matolino's widely cited article is not without its critics. One of them is Thaddaeus Metz's rebuttal of Matolino's position in his 2014 article. Although Metz (2014, 66) finds it hard to disagree with Matolino and Kwindiwi's claims, Metz's response is that the scholarly enquiry into, and the political application of, ubuntu should be viewed as projects that are only now properly getting started. What this means is that ubuntu cannot be dismissed since we have not exhausted the idea as a proper philosophical enquiry as well as its practical application in politics. When one carefully listens to the authors, he says there is no reason to think that ubuntu is unique to a pre-industrial, small-scale setting. Even in the highly industrial societies, people still try to live ubuntu values such as being humane, respectful, and compassionate. Also, they are, on most occasions,

willing to share what they have with others. As an ethical theory of what should be moral in the twenty-first century, ubuntu has a lot to offer in accounting for how individuals and institutions (METZ 2014, 65). In that regard, Metz finds ubuntu philosophically interesting and compelling. Matolino has tried to respond to Metz's reply by claiming that the critique does not pose a serious threat to their original position. He insists that Metz's critique is a weak position that cannot be defended, and that his defence of ubuntu is not philosophical but dogmatic (MATOLINO 2014, 214).

Following this overview of his work on personhood, my next step is to engage what can be described as Matolino's shift in orientation in his philosophical journey.

### **Matolino, Philosophy and African Realities: The Afro-communitarian Democracy**

Having considered personhood and its attendant notions in African philosophy that form the corpus of most of his earlier publications, Matolino proceeded to work on other pertinent themes in African philosophy and has published books and numerous articles around them. While carrying on with the spirit of critical philosophy, which has characterised his philosophical scholarship, there is what I regard as a noticeable shift in Matolino's philosophical trajectory, although I do not find any disconnection between ideas. He is shifting from metaphysics of the self and community, to social and political systems that can be modelled on a specific concept of the self. That shift is not out of the blues. As I found it instructive to start writing this piece by looking at his doctoral thesis, as a recommendation for further studies, Matolino suggested that African scholars, like himself, should seriously consider furthering research on a political theory within the African context. He says such research should go beyond the claims and aims of African socialism as espoused by the post-colonial African leaders who doubled as social and political philosophers and who obviously modelled their philosophy on the communitarian self. This is what I think he is doing in his latest monographs.

For Matolino, African political philosophy should take care of the genuine needs of Africans on the continent by engaging genuine African realities, which are both negative and positive. That is, in the contemporary period, Matolino's philosophical engagement has put the plight of the African people at the centre. He explains that the

African continent is faced with a grim reality requiring the attention of philosophical reflection. In contemporary times, the African continent has had to deal with political problems such as civil wars, power grabs, an absence of democracy in the modern and traditional sense, corruption, poor governance that results in the spread of otherwise preventable hunger, disease and death, and others (MATOLINO 2008, 194).

Matolino's interest in developing a political theory modelled on the concept of personhood in African philosophy, which is characterised by existential experiences, has led him to produce further critical monographs. In the 2017 book titled *Consensus as Democracy in Africa*, Matolino interrogates whether consensus can be considered an important part of democracy in the present day. That is, in this book, Matolino provides a critique of consensual democracy, which has largely been discussed and advocated by scholars, such as Kwasi Wiredu (1991), as the type of democracy that suits Africa. Matolino traces consensual democracy to Africa's past and its traditions. For its proponents, consensual democracy satisfies a more meaningful definition of democracy than what currently obtains in a majoritarian democracy. In order to understand consensual democracy, there is a need to juxtapose it with majoritarian democracy. Majoritarian democracy is characterised by an adversarial competition for power. On that basis, consensual democracy is regarded as a viable alternative that is capable of curing the ills of the majoritarian democratic practice burdening Africa in contemporary times. Some of these ills are political instability, poverty, and hunger, which provide less than satisfying modes of existence. For Wiredu, the majoritarian democracy is seen as the origin of destructive tendencies such as the promotion of division in society on party political lines (See MATOLINO 2018, 10). As a critical scholar, Matolino sees the starting point of advocating consensual democracy as the presupposed failures of the majoritarian democracy on the African continent. The majoritarian democratic practice periodically chooses representatives at various levels of government where different political parties compete for power. The party that gets the majority of the votes commandeers power.

Matolino sees the first and main complaint against majoritarian democracy concern as its presupposed failure to adequately capture the maximal interpretation of democracy. The

second complaint is that the majority who are given the mandate to run the affairs of the government are given a blank cheque to act as they see fit. This inevitably results in what may be termed as the tyranny of the majority. In this way, the minority (the opposition) side will oppose anything for the sake of opposing. The third complaint is that majoritarian democracy is regarded as an alien political practice and theory on the continent. For Matolino, this is the least convincing complaint against majoritarian democracy. Another complaint is that overall, majoritarian democracy is destructive as it promotes divisions in society as people fight for votes and jostle for positions.

Although it is important to develop a democratic theory that satisfies the requirements of democratic dispensation, Matolino thinks that such a theory should ultimately be grounded in local conditions or existential experiences. The working definition of democracy for Matolino is the one advocated by Abraham Lincoln that it is “as governance of the people, by the people, for the people.” In this working definition, Matolino isolates the concept of “people” as fundamental in the sense that “people must always be able to freely participate in the decision-making processes that affect their lives, this is not always possible” (MATOLINO 2018, 55). Matolino’s primary concern then is that of critiquing and not defending what he calls by-gones in the way Wiredu does in suggesting consensual democracy based on old traditions as relevant to Africa’s political situation. Of course, as one would expect, Matolino doubts the viability of Wiredu’s project. Besides, he is not even interested in replacing the consensual democracy with an alternative system, nor does he even admire foreign systems or institutions.

Matolino sees freedom as central to any form of democracy. The pursuit of freedom is for higher values that are good for those who seek to pursue those freedoms without necessarily an accompanying desire to prejudice, harm or infringe on others’ rights. Within consensus-based communocracy<sup>1</sup>, there is little regard given to the individual’s rights or other tendencies that seek to declare a person as a self-governing entity with the capacity to freely choose and associate as she sees fit. In Matolino’s mind, the individual with the communitarian set-up, which in Wiredu’s thinking contains

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<sup>1</sup> The kind of political practice that prevailed in traditional African societies which had elements of communism and democracy



democratic elements, is not free to freely associate with other individuals outside her clan. Secondly, the individual is obligated to choose only those options that clearly advance the collective interests of the community. In addition, the individual is also burdened with expectations and directives of what ideas are worth defending (MATOLINO 2017, 114). A communally-oriented political outlook imposes obligations of a communitarian sort on its members. However, we must know that, whether the community or we like it or not, individuals will always have their individualised preferences. The important thing is that these preferences should be managed in ways that do not cause undue restriction on what they ordinarily prefer to do.

Having examined and critiqued Wiredu's consensual democracy, Matolino then published a book titled *Afro-communitarian democracy* (2019). According to him, conditions such as hunger and disease, underdevelopment, material poverty, and general and other material deprivations can be directly traced to the poverty that exists in the political sphere, especially the irresponsible behaviour of various leaders (MATOLINO 2019, xi). Although scholars and other concerned individuals have made countless attempts to explain and rectify this situation, Matolino argues that what is lacking is an attempt at theorising about the kind of policies that could be useful for Africa's unique condition. The so-called 'Western' ideas about democracies that have arguably been forced on Africa lack social structures and the attendant belief systems to sustain them. In no way does this suggest that Africans are antagonistic to democracy, but probably the political theories of democracy may not be suited for Africa. At the same time, Matolino argues that suitable modes of democracy "must not be rooted in ideological proclivities of either finding an African essence or retrieving a long gone past" (MATOLINO 2019, xi). On the contrary, Matolino sees the duty of every thinker on the African continent as that of moulding a democratic theory that satisfies democratic conditions, like as peaceful co-existence among different political players, while at the same time, such a democratic theory is sufficiently grounded in the unique African conditions.

Matolino sees the solution to these dilemmas confronting the African political situation, such as bad political leadership and political instability, in a communitarian democracy. Matolino coins

this phrase with the hope of developing a political theory which takes care of both communitarian and democratic elements. Matolino does this by straddling between the debates on the nature of African communitarianism and the theoretical limits of socialism and consensual democracy. He first works on the shortcomings of African socialism and consensual democracy as modes that are representative of a defensible version of communitarianism. Secondly, he develops a political commitment to limited communitarianism (see MATOLINO, 2014) to avoid traditional problems associated with old accounts of communitarianism. This is a democracy rooted in communitarian structures. For Matolino, modern African communitarianism should be informed by three things, namely: “the purpose of philosophy, the reality that Africans exist in, and the nature of human relations which ultimately constitute a sense of community” (MATOLINO 2019, xiv). He engages communitarianism for it “is informed by the common reference to the importance of community both as a regulatory framework and as an inspiration of what appropriate human behaviour and social organisation should be” (2019, xvi). This communitarianism is not an essentialist but a normative one that is capable of inspiring the formation of political organisations suitable for African societies in their situatedness. In addition, this communitarianism is framed on the understanding that community is an organic dimension of people’s lives that best captures their aspirations and serves as an inspiration for the realisation of those aspirations. That is, for Matolino, it is clear that communities are always shaped by individuals who are capable of securing their dignity. Ideally, the community has to recognise that individuals are self-determining entities. This thinking only serves to continue Matolino’s opprobrium of what he regards as negative elements of the communitarian setup.

### **A Critique of Matolino’s Basis of a New Afro-communitarian Democratic Theory**

Reaching this far, it is pertinent to critically engage Matolino’s Afro-communitarian democracy. Although Matolino’s transition from being a very fierce critic of African communitarianism and its cognate concepts towards being its sympathiser, there is a need to take this shift with a critical eye. When Matolino suggests an Afro-communitarianism which is free of traditional communalist

hindrance, nationalist romanticism and the never-ending need to find the African difference (MATOLINO 2019, 103), one would only wonder how the suggested theory would be able to retain its status as a form of communitarianism even though in an adulterated form. According to Matolino, limited communitarianism is the kind of communitarianism that prioritises the dignity of human beings. This dignity consists of the claim that human beings are special entities who should contribute to interpreting and shaping their reality. So, communities are ultimately shaped by individuals who have in mind what such communities would help them achieve (MATOLINO 2019, 158). From my reading, what Matolino is suggesting is that we should limit the influence of traditional forms of life in the interpretation of modern African experiences. This is well expressed in his 2014 *Personhood in African Philosophy*, where he tries to develop limited communitarianism, which, in my view, is a modified version of moderate communitarianism. In limited communitarianism, Matolino attempts to separate the personal and social identities because, in his view, both radical and moderate communitarians have failed to untangle these separate identities (MATOLINO 2014, 142). My thinking is that the attempt to separate the personal and social identities is difficult and, therefore, a futile exercise on the basis that both the personal and the social are in a symbiotic relationship unless Matolino is suggesting the personal or the social entities are each capable of existing without the other. I cannot imagine any communitarian setup that does not minimally prioritise the community. Although Matolino has adopted Lincoln's definition of democracy, namely, a government of the people, by the people and for the people, he has in mind the idea that "people must always be able to freely participate in the decision-making processes that affect their lives" (MATOLINO 2018, 55), in my view, that definition's emphasis on people as a central notion hardly suggests there should be a separation between people as personal and people as the social. In addition, in limiting the influences of communitarianism, one would also expect limitations on the excesses of individualism. At best, there should be a suggestion of how the personal and the social converge to form a workable unit. This is what Michael O. Eze (2008) has done with his re-presenting of African communitarianism as a discursive or conversational ideal which ultimately seeks to establish a balance between the individual and community. This is also the case

with Dismas A. Masolo (2004), whose understanding of communitarian is that it advocates for the adjustment of the freedoms of an individual to the conditions of the collective whole in the positive sense. Similarly, in his *Ethics of Identity*, Kwame Anthony Appiah (2005) could not put it better when he suggested linking the public and personal aspects of identity when he argued that both the individual and society share the responsibility of authoring individual identity. In summary, it would be a daunting, if not an impossible task, to develop a political theory that is intended to understand and resolve the African predicament without considering certain communitarian commitments arising from the traditional African value systems, however minimal they would be.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper, I sought to trace the process, which resulted in Bernard Matolino developing the basis for his new Afro-communitarian political theory of democracy. As I have said, one might think Matolino has moved away from his orientation in the metaphysics of the self along with its relationship to the community. I think his critical writings on the metaphysics of the self serve as a preparation for his critical engagement with the type of political dispensation consistent with the African concept of the self. Specifically, Matolino has pointed to the Western version of democracy as having been forcibly implemented on the continent while lacking supportive social structures and attendant beliefs to sustain it. The kind of democracy that is suitable for African countries need not be rooted in the ideological inclinations of either searching for an African essence or retrieving a long-gone past but in Africa's existential experience. However, I have my own misgivings about this kind of democracy which wants to limit the influences of a communitarian set-up without reducing those of individualism.

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