

# AN OUTLINE OF THE BASIS FOR A NEW AFRO-COMMUNITARIAN POLITICAL THEORY OF DEMOCRACY

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## **Introduction**

My aim in this paper is to offer an explanation of the orientation I have adopted in my work on African political theory. This explanation is necessitated by some puzzlement that has arisen as a result of the commitment I have sought to pursue. The most prominent complaint has been that I must own up and claim my liberal colours (OYOWE 2015, 514). I have been asked to refrain from making communitarian thought the basis of my political thinking as my commitment to communitarianism is not as thoroughgoing as it should (OYOWE 2015, 514). It is important that I explain this accusation away.

## **An outline of the basis of a new Afro-communitarian political theory of democracy**

While I believe that this accusation is understandable, I also hold that it is not justifiable. The roots of this accusation are in the entrenched theoretical dichotomization of individual entitlements and communitarian claims about the constitution of the individual (MOLEFE 2017, 9). In the definition of the individual, the real tussle has been between two, apparently, irreconcilable views. One view sees persons as entities that possess inalienable attributes that constitute their being. The contrasting view sees persons as entities that are constituted by their surrounding environs. The implications of these contrasting views are not limited to matters of the identity of persons. Their spill has been felt in other areas, especially with political theory. How we conceive of persons seems to dictate the political theory we think are appropriate for our conceptions of what

persons are. This could be the reason why in Africa, for instance, liberal democracy is resisted both in theory and practice. Its prioritization of the individual over the community is anathema to the prevailing theories of identity and resultant political commitments. This dichotomization, in my view, is unnecessary. I am not proposing the possibility of a hybrid view that seeks to incorporate both extremes. Rather, I think that a responsible theorist is one who does not profess blind adherence to either view. The African continent has become comfortable with both views and their consequent practices such that it is no longer viable to talk of Africa as if it were a place that has never been affected by liberal or individualistic values and associated theories.

However, the notion of the individual has proven to be a troublesome point of reckoning in circles of identity and political thought (see MOLEFE & MARAGANEDZHA 2017). No matter how communitarian an idea is, it has to articulate how the individual is conceived. Such articulation has always involved concessions about the inviolability of the individuality of the individual. In plain terms, all communitarian thought recognizes the absoluteness of the fact that there are individuals who are distinct from the fact and existence of the community. How this realization has been dealt with has resulted in a number of philosophical controversies and downright absurdities. The classical examples of these instances are Ifeanyi Menkiti (1984) and Kwame Gyekye's (1997) contributions to this debate.

There have been recent interventions on behalf of Menkiti and some on behalf of Gyekye. These interventions have two shared characteristics. First, their devotion to either Menkiti or Gyekye, is uncompromising. Secondly, while these devotions make philosophical moves in their confessionals, they are rather noticeable for their adeptness at insisting on the virtues of their side. The discussion cannot be moved beyond Menkiti and Gyekye. This does not mean that there have not been plausible attempts at offering more persuasive analysis of the debate. Take D.A. Masolo's *Self and Community in a Changing World* (2010) as an exemplary text that takes us out of the clutches of the Menkiti-Gyekye spell. How has this text been treated? It has been confined to the periphery of the debate. Yet the book's central claim is what thinkers in this field should take seriously. The community, in which the African individual exists and draws her identity from, has been a changing entity. In its evolving

form, we have to think about how it is to be relied on as a source of identity and what that identity will look like. Masolo's view will not allow us to trace our way back to the pure African village in the glory of its communal set-up. On the contrary, it would force us to open new vistas of understanding the multiplicity of communities and accompanying individual experiences of it. I align myself to this thinking. Such thinking, however, has consequences that appear to be unpalatable to many communitarians. I think establishing the correct communitarian doctrine for African thought has tended to dominate the minds of discussants on this topic. The correctness of that doctrine, it seems, will largely depend on the successful linkage between thinkers' adumbrations and some facts of actual African communities. Unfortunately, that link tends to seek facts about traditional communities. There is no serious theorization of how communities in Africa have changed and what appropriate theorization has to be, to reflect the realities accompanying that change. I take this change seriously, and my theorization proceeds from facts about this change.

### **Thinking of the Community**

In the African context, there are many ways of thinking of the community. Two of those are relevant to my discussion. The first is thinking of the community as if it were a metaphysical category. In this respect, the community is seen as responsible for constituting entities such as persons. Be it a radical, moderate or any other understanding, the community is primary in the formation of the individual's identity. The second approach sees the community as an important source of political thought and reality. This view takes the community as responsible for how we think of individuals and how they are to arrange their lives as realities that co-exist as well as realities that create and constitute various institutions within the community. Individual life, under this view, must be aligned with the interests of the community. The difference between these two views is that the former is metaphysical while the latter is social cum political. However, this distinction is hardly taken seriously in literature, as exemplified in Molefe and Maraganedzha (2017). The implications of this distinction are also routinely ignored as discussants treat these categories as interchangeable or not so distinct. This, in my view, has contributed to some recognizable confusion,

first, in how personhood is handled, and second in how political theory unfolds, in line with discussions on personhood.

I have come to the conclusion that the way in which personhood is made a communitarian metaphysical category, has had a negative effect on political theory. The effect has been that politics has been conceived in ways that are essentially in line with communitarianism. The reason for that alignment has been to rehabilitate political thought so it reflects an authentic African pedigree. The need for such a move is obviously historical – the negation of effects of the aftermath of colonialism. This alignment is negative in two respects, firstly, it forces African political theorization to become conservative through communitarian fixation. Secondly, it dismisses anything that is not in line with the demands of communitarianism as either foreign-inspired or false. The implication of this is that political thought and practice remain stagnant in their quest to satisfy the demands of communitarianism. While a rethink of communitarianism is possible, it is not the favored approach. What is generally favored is an interpretative battle of who gets what right about old communitarian divisions.

As I have already intimated, the defenders of new modes of communitarianism have been Masolo (2010) and myself (MATOLINO 2019; 2020). We have also both suffered the fate of failing to influence the dynamics of communitarian thought towards a more modern reckoning with the current state of African communities in their diverse existence. Since my aim, here, is not to critique anyone's thought I will immediately turn to outlining my own thinking about an appropriate notion of community with respect to both persons and politics.

If we wish to continue with communitarian thought in 21<sup>st</sup>-century Africa, all old models of such thought will simply not do. While old thought may be informative about what used to happen in the past or about how we can refashion past thought to inspire present and future thinking about the community, what remains is that past communitarian models have little to do with the present and the future. While most communitarian thought may be said to retain a degree of rigor and creativity, on the part of their thinkers, what cannot be disputed is that these thinkers model themselves on the reality of communal thought as created by traditional communities. For good or bad, such communities are gone. What do we need to do then? Think

communities anew in light of the reality that ordinary people live through.

A very significant aspect of communitarian thought is its insistence on humanizing persons. By this, I refer to the value that communitarians place on persons as entities that deserve recognition in a web of relations and associations. This value is a human value. Communitarians are always worried about how the humanity of persons is obtained and retained. This humanity, in essence, is about how persons realize their full worth as members of a community. That worth is realizable through successful integration and full participation in the community's life. That community's life will include all that is valuable to humans including social and moral goods. Such goods are an indispensable requirement to the making of humans into persons. We can think of these goods as a compound of material and non-material things. Under the former, we could have basics such as what individuals need for their survival and comfort. This may include ensuring that the poor are shielded from the humiliating effects of poverty. Under the latter, we can have things such as values, beliefs, social relations, and feelings of worth that are given to the individual by the community. This will ensure that the individual is capacitated to be a full and worthy individual who will enjoy the full benefit of being human by virtue of belonging to a community that affirms that humanity. While the individual is expected to derive benefit from the community, she is also made to appreciate that she has an obligation towards ensuring that she conducts herself in ways that promote the good of the community, which becomes the "good" for everyone.

Not only is this an ideal arrangement or a far-placed desire of what an exemplary community should be. It is actually what most communitarian societies were. While these societies were not so advanced and were mostly traditional, in their outlook, their ethical and political systems have been deemed sufficiently advanced. They are so advanced that they are seen as an inspiring model of being human. Hence their popularity.

However, what I wish to caution at this early stage is that any communitarian analysis or conceptualization, must be faithful to the realities of the communities from where these theories are derived. The point is, simply, any communitarian theory is complemented by the lived experiences of that community and the people in it.

Communitarian theories are not products of the toil in the abstract. They are products of encounters with similes of traditional communities' values or approximations of those traditional communities' lived experiences or actual traditional communities trying to survive the onslaught of modernization. What this points to is that the relationship between lived experience in a community and theorizing about that lived experience is indissoluble.

Persons in the community are made humans by their experiences of community. A community that gives persons all the desired implements of being human are going to be successful at the project of being human as well as the project of being full members of a community. There has to be a high level of communal stability and individual integration for the communitarian story to succeed. Thinking about how this stability and integration have come about, how they are sustained, as well as what they signify to both entities (the individual and the community), is theorizing. This theorizing is what we call communitarianism, while the experience of the individuals, groups, and reality of this community is what we call communalism. Theorizing about stable and integrated communities does not create such communities. It merely either explains how they functioned or illustrates how such communities may function. If theorizing is to explain and understand how such communities functioned, it may fall under domains such as history, anthropology, or history of ethics (such as someone who describes the Homeric ethic). If the theorizing is about how such communities may function, it falls under speculative ethics or some other branch of philosophy, such as political or social philosophy. There is nothing wrong with either approach.

However, African communitarianism has been a mixture of both implicitly or explicitly. It has paid allegiance to traditional communalism from which it derives its hopeful and futuristic articulation of communitarianism. That communitarianism will be the foundation on which ideal versions of African societies, or large segments thereof, will be laid. I find this way of proceeding problematic for two major reasons. Firstly, there is a rupture (deliberate or not) between theory and facts. Yet that rupture should not occur, especially for a topic such as this. The way communitarian speculation has proceeded has been with absolute disregard for the lived communal/community experiences. The most crucial disregard

has been for how current community realities can or cannot support the possibility of communitarian thought and entailed experiences. Secondly, there has been a disregard for the divergence of community experiences and how those divergent (and, at times, conflicting experiences) can have an effect on communitarian thought.

My thinking on community and my version of communitarianism is informed by these disregarded facts. I take these facts seriously for two primary reasons. The first has to do with my own orientation to conceptualization as an African philosopher. I am committed to theories that are rooted in the lived experiences of Africans as subjects who have real experiences in life. Reflections of those real experiences are likely to yield a better theorization of Africa and its people, who inhabit such a place. Secondly, I am committed to a mode of philosophizing that seeks to find ways in which the average African can be empowered to be a full agent who can have better qualitative experiences of life than is currently the case. Most Africans exist under conditions that limit the possibility of living a fully human experience in a community that cares and a community that they would care for.

My thinking about the community has been influenced by two divergent approaches in explaining Africa's current situation. I do believe that the African topography represents the most acute contradiction of the present era. This is specifically in reference to the quality of human life. Africa has some excellent places characterized by acceptable levels of development indicated by high health, education, employment, wealth, and security standards. However, such excellence is limited to a few. The majority are restricted to minimal standards in various urban dwellings characterized by scant resources, patchy service delivery (as in water, electricity, health, roads, education etc.), political, social and economic disempowerment (or operating at the fringes). Urban dwellers are divided into several categories ranging from low-income households to inner-city tenants to backyard dwellers to shanty dwellers right down to the homeless. Their experiences of life are different but stunted in many ways. Then there are non-urban dwellers who live in places such as farming villages, pseudo-traditional villages, deeply rural and underdeveloped areas, as well as the edges of urban zones. Save for wealthy middle-scale and large-scale farmers, and these dwellers are also on the fringes of flourishing human existence. I shall call these latter two

disadvantaged Africans. Their disadvantage proceeds from their almost certain exclusion from meaningful participation, contribution and beneficiation from broader society. I will not go into the details of their banal and squalid conditions of existence as I will rely on the reader's knowledge or capacity of imagination for such a state.

What is undeniable is that the economic, political, and social state of Africa is in shambles. For many thinkers, the dysfunctionality of the political sphere has spilled into the other two spheres to create the perennially underdeveloped Africa that we have become very familiar with. There are two explanations for how this state of affairs was obtained. The first, identified as internalism, places all blame on local African actors. According to this view, all blame is on African political actors who, through their decisions and actions, have destroyed Africa's democratic prospects. The death of democracy has led to many other deaths, the view claims. The second view, known as externalism, places all blame, for Africa's woes, on external agents. This view holds that once Africa was interfered with, through colonialism, forces of similar negative effects have always battered Africa. In general, the view holds that there are some global actors who have an interest in seeing Africa continue to exist at the margins of democracy and development. Thus the continued failure of Africa as a viable political space is largely owed to external interference. This view absolves local players of any serious responsibility for Africa's state.

While I used to be an ardent internalist, I am now convinced that the two explanations can be brought together to account for Africa's state. Although their approach might appear irreconcilable, in their attempt to explain the same phenomena, they share a lot in common. Two of those shared characteristics are: attempting to understand the genesis of Africa's problems and apportioning blame. Since such a project does not have the exactitude of the hard sciences, it could be the case that there is a measure of truth in both assessments and that truth could be complementary. It is not unimaginable that the external factors led to the particular shaping of the internal factors. Had the external factors not occurred in the way they did, our internal factors could have developed in a totally different way. At the very least, we could say these two are related in an antecedent and precedent sort of way.



What these two approaches do is describe a very depressing state of Africa. We can then imagine what sort of communities constitute this state of affairs. While it is correct to assert that there are functional communities that retain the traditional ethos of care, humanism, and regard for the welfare of the others, it would also not be an exaggeration to claim that such communities are no longer the norm. In fact, communities that matter or communities that represent Africa are ones that are under severe pressure captured by both internalists and externalists. These are the communities that I have described above. Thinking about these communities or conceptualizing the reality and likelihood of these communities forming lasting bonds requires that we take a different understanding of what communities are in present-day Africa. That different understanding means departing from treating traditional models of the community as if they had the capacity to inspire any *sense of community* for people whose existence is precarious.

Our new understanding of community must at least address three major issues. The first is the unstable, quite undemocratic, and ever-perilous state of politics on the continent. The second is the state of underdevelopment, certified by the record that the continent holds as the poorest place on earth. The third is the social conditioning of Africa. As a formerly colonized place that bears all the marks of the brutality of colonialism, the social conditioning of Africa is one that proceeds from the reality of that act of colonialism. Its markers as a place of thought, cultural life, and orientation is heavily conditioned by colonial effect. Hence, many thinkers have dedicated themselves to banners such as decoloniality, postcoloniality, and identitarian politics.

If we take these issues seriously, we will immediately see that our traditional models of community, by virtue of the logic of their origin, are not well-suited to address these challenges. While there are many who will argue that traditional models have the power to offer prescriptive conceptualization that is effective in countering the ills mentioned above, I hold a different view. I believe that these challenges are so complex and so devastating that they require an equal form of conceptualization. A theory that is inspired by a community that is based on harmony cannot do well for a society that is based on conflict, discrimination, poverty, and disintegration. My attempts have been to think about how we can configure the

relationship between the individual and the community within the sphere I have described above. As I do not think that the debate is about what is prior to the other between the community and the individual, I have moved to what I consider to be an important consideration in the modern formulation of community. My commitment is not to dismantling the importance of community. For the basic reason that community is an indispensable reality for all humans, I will keep it as a viable path to thinking about humans. However, as there are many communities, there will also be many ways of thinking about those communities. The most important community in Africa currently (economically, socially, and politically) is the urban setting where most disintegration has happened. It is important to conceptualize this community as a site of suffering and as the face of most of Africa's ills. Thinking of this community through the prism of economic, social, and political factors has led me to emphasize the importance of thinking about how modern communities affirm or denigrate individual agency.

My understanding of individual agency is not to be confused with the traditional opponent of communitarianism, individualism. My idea of individual agency is based on an attempt to understand how the community affirms and enhances the individual's experience of life as an entity that is socially embedded. Does the large-scale picture of the society that cascades down to little units of various communities, enhance or diminish the individual's experience of membership? Does the individual fully identify with the community such that she feels her contribution to be valuable? Does the community create a possibility for the individual to be a full participant in the determination of its affairs and life? Is the community capable of giving the individual a flourishing life? Since the answers to these questions are going to be negative, by my reckoning, I have sought to unpack the reasons for this. My greatest contention has been that communities that are incapable of providing material security to their members so they can lead a minimally decent life, are zones that brew all sorts of disintegration right up to identity and morality. If we are to think about community in this instance, we are supposed to reframe what the community is in a broken setting. In particular, we are supposed to think about how the individual's agency could be restored so that the individual has a sense of a viable and supported experience of life in community. Such an experience is not

possible in alienating, violent, postcolonial, and impoverished dictatorial settings.

This is what I have sought to pursue in understanding what democracy could be for Africans. In my *Consensus as Democracy in Africa* (2018a), I have rejected both consensus and socialism as viable models of democracy as they are not rooted in the experiences of modern Africans. Against the obsession of finding a perfect definition of democracy for Africa, I argue that democracy, whether in concept or practice, must primarily be concerned with satisfying ordinary African aspirations. Those aspirations are of a political nature yet far removed from current theorization. I attempt to offer an example of what the precariousness of African existence means, politically, and how it can be addressed in my *Afro-Communitarian Democracy* (2019). In this installment, I place limits on what the community's claims are on the shaping of the individual's experience both politically and socially. Greater room, I argue, needs to be given to individual inventiveness.

The reason for my insistence on individual inventiveness lies in two complementary considerations. The first is that the community is not a fiat that is decreed at some determinate starting point so as to burden individuals with long-standing obligations. Rather, the community is a result of an ever-unfolding convergence of a variety of human intentions. These intentions compete for space to influence the community, and at times they cooperate to create a stable idea of what the community is. This ever-unfolding reality is a result of humans exercising their agency as free and rational participants in the process of creating their own reality and determining the sort of circumstances that they wish to experience that reality under. Through this agency, individuals are able to set up what they consider to be the most important requirement for them to function optimally. Such a requirement may take many forms, depending on how individuals conceive of their station. It may present itself as extreme versions of communitarianism or individualism. Whatever form it takes, it shows the contingency of both the understanding of agency by the agent as well as the constitution of the community. The second consideration is how individuals respond to conditions of their existence. Extreme versions of communitarianism are a result of experienced conditions in traditional communities that necessitated such commitments. Since such conditions have disappeared, we need to rethink what

appropriate reaction should be to conditions that besiege African agency in the here and now. If these conditions were to necessitate a communitarian response, I have maintained that communitarian response would not be one that is consistent with the extreme version. It would be one that seeks to address the contorted relationship between the individual and the society in which she lives. This contortion has arisen from the political, economic, and social arena. Politically, African societies have become more unstable, paralyzed, corrupt, and dictatorial. Economically, African societies have furthered poverty, inequality, impaired productivity, and promoted backward policies. Generally, the ordinary citizen is worse off than ever. Socially, African societies remain disintegrated and unable to end ills like avoidable disease, tribalism, conflict, and underdevelopment.

It has therefore been my argument that any responsible communitarian theory would be one that reckons with these sickening realities of being African. It would then attempt to find an appropriate relationship between the individual (particularly the downtrodden and excluded) and this idea of community. I am not sure what the extent of this community will have to be, I am not even sure how that community will forge bonds between itself and that individual. Take, for example, the idea of a state as a community of citizens. The state, I suggest, is incapable of operating in any thoroughgoing sense of community principally because it is both dysfunctional and alienating. It, therefore, serves no purpose to the citizen (the downtrodden type). Maybe what we need are ideas of communities of resistance or communities of empowerment. Such communities will be formed because of the recognition of the paralysis of what could have been sources of the community such as the state or nation. These new communities are communities based on shared identity that arises out of the very paralysis at the macro level. They are different in their constitution and orientation because they have been excluded and marginalized by centres of power and influence.

What I have sought to pursue, then, is a theory that would be able to create integration of the disposed and excluded individual whose existence is at the margins of society. The numbers of such individuals, I claim, are not negligible. It is, therefore, important to consider their precarious existence when theorizing about community.

### **A Proposed New Communitarian Political Theory**

It is from the considerations above that I have committed my theorization to the real people of Africa who live in wretched conditions. People who are so alienated by the experience of being Africans such that they operate at the margins of African identity. States such as being impoverished, a war victim, and a destitute, do not lead to any agency that assures one of personhood that is concurrent with full membership in a community. People who find themselves in these situations have been effectively robbed of their dignity and cannot, therefore, be full participants in whatever envisaged community. The only community that the excluded can feel to be fully part of, is that of those who are like them. Squatters will form their own distinct community, and inner city dwellers will do the same, and township/high-density area dwellers will do likewise. While it is possible for these communities to find avenues to humanize and dignify individual members, such communities remain problematic for what they represent. They are disadvantaged communities. Their disadvantage proceeds mainly from their low economic standing. This low economic standing spills into the political and social arena. Politically, the poor are used as ballot markers by the political elite for the furtherance of the political elite's very own interests. Beyond voting, the poor are unable to meaningfully participate in the intricacies of democratic governance and decision-making processes that are geared to exclude them, anyway. Socially, they are unable to influence or change value systems to work in ways that are at the very least favorable to all. They are excluded from all influential forums and all avenues of creating social values that contribute to a community that they identify with fully.

This has led me to the conviction that political theory should address these realities as opposed to being an abstract advancement of desirable notions. Whether those notions are issued by some belief in communitarianism or some other commitment, they will not be of relevance to Africa and Africans unless they were to show how their theories would transform African lives. My major contention has been that a relevant political theory is one that will address fundamental problems that have proven to be disruptive to the qualitative experience of life in Africa. I have identified these problems as that of the economy and that of politics.

In respect of the economic problem, I have sought to demonstrate that Africa cannot ignore the fact that we are in a global setting where the economy plays a crucial role in determining a number of factors about human experience of life. A country that is economically stagnant or a country that is economically unproductive will compromise its citizens in many ways. People who live in poor countries experience a number of negative effects such as unemployment, lack of resources to change their lives, little to no income, little food, bad housing, poor education, and poor to no health provisions; the list goes on. This economic factor is quite limiting in the construction of individual agency that is fully incorporated and participatory in some sort of community. For most inhabitants of the continent, the economy has slammed them into miserable existence which is fodder for pathetic economic measurements that are routinely paraded on the global stage as evidence of Africa's underdevelopment. For their part, most African governments have appeared either callous or outrageously incompetent when it comes to developing policies and practices that uplift the material and associated levels of their people. What I have attempted to demonstrate is the importance of developing a political philosophy that takes seriously the impact that economic arrangement has on how people experience their agency within current African set-ups. If we are to develop a communitarian theory, I have insisted, such a theory must be explicit on what its economic commitments are and how it sees those commitments as capable of assuring Africa's global competitiveness while improving the material quality of African lives. It is no longer convenient for Africans to accept, as ordinary reality, that they are condemned to a poor economic standing. It is equally not acceptable that any political philosopher, on the continent, ignores the urgency and shame that this state of affairs brings to African people. The fact that there are malnourished children and impoverished adults on the continent should be cause for great depression for our so-called leaders. It should also jolt all political philosophers to think about, philosophically, getting rid of hunger and desperation. Surely, philosophers must know that a destitute and thoroughly impoverished person can never be party to lofty theoretical articulations of identity and personal reflections of what exists.

Regarding politics, the poverty of its practice and the general maliciousness of its application needs no introduction. The poverty of

realpolitik, on the continent, is only matched by its theorization. Lacking both imagination and urgency, African political philosophers have been largely consumed with the need to find justifications and explanations for traditional sources of the community. From this, debates have been on the correct understanding of the person, the correct form of political theory to describe traditional politics and how that can be applied to modern African reality. I have concluded that these debates are not only limited but quite dated. The reason is that they do not fit the real circumstances of the current African experience. That experience is as varied as I have sought to describe in my *Personhood in African Philosophy* (2014). What, therefore, is needed is a rethink of what a modern communitarian political theory has to reckon with. While I am not opposed to communitarianism, I am an advocate of a communitarian account that takes the agency of individuals seriously. I also advocate a communitarian theory that takes seriously the capability of individuals to contribute to the creation of a community of their desire in response to a variety of factors that shape their reality. I have held that if individuals are given the opportunity to create communities of their desire, they are never going to create communities that undermine their own individual agency, dignity, and aspirations. Tragically, for most Africans, their sense of community is one that has been imposed on them through insistence on the veracity and longevity of traditional ethics as well as the terrifying realities of broken modern communities.

### **A Word to the Critics**

My work has attracted criticism from a number of thinkers who suggest that my positions are wrong. The criticisms can be divided into two camps, those objecting to my views of personhood and those objecting to my political theory. Criticism against my views of personhood has also doubled as support for Menkiti. The major accusation is that I am unable to interpret Menkiti correctly. The chief accusers have been Etieyibo (2018), Ikuenobe (2018), and Molefe and Maraganedzha (2017). The accusation has basically amounted to the idea that I ascribe, alongside Gykye (1997), a radical communitarian commitment to Menkiti that he never intended. I have found this accusation odd. Menkiti stated openly that his interpretation of traditional society and the communitarianism associated with it prioritized the community over the individual. My objection to

Menkiti, in any case, is not similar to Gyekye's. I even hold Gyekye to be not so dissimilar from Menkiti. The real point of my objection to Menkiti is that his communitarianism is dogmatic. It is a hardline interpretation of traditional communities that is not open to the possibilities of other communities. I am an ardent advocate of African communities that are different from the one described by Menkiti. I am fascinated by broken, dysfunctional, and poor communities that constitute a significant reality of Africa. The second criticism has targeted my version expressed both in my accounts of communitarianism and personhood. Two representative critics have been Oyowe (2015), who has identified me as a liberal, and Ani (2022), who identifies my account as cosmopolitan. The major target of these criticisms has been that my rendition of communitarianism does not succeed in capturing anything communitarian, hence the alternatives I get branded with. It suffices to alert these thinkers to the existence of various communitarian models before mine. There is Menkiti's, Gyekye's, and Masolo's. Mine is one amongst many. It is communitarian as it takes the facts of the community seriously. Unlike Menkiti, though, I do not see the community as prior to the individual. On the contrary, I believe that it is individuals in their situatedness who create communities. Further, I believe that Africa is constituted by a variety of communities that do not align with the Menkiti approach to defining community.

### **Conclusion**

What has motivated my approach to communitarian thought and subsequent political theorization is my belief that the idea of community in Africa has changed. This change has not been quite positive. Its negative characteristics are mainly registered in how people live as individuals. Living in dire poverty where one is disempowered from contributing to the good of the community hinders the development of both the individual and the community. While I admit that the community will always be a serious factor to reckon with in our theorization, such theorization must be in keeping with the realities of communities and the people who constitute such communities. I am not committed to the view of the community as an articulable ideal which can be realized in some hoped-for future. I do not even think that the current communitarian talk where certain versions of communitarians are presented as having capacity to



influence global ethics, is plausible. What I believe is that any talk of ethics should seek to address Africans' immediate existential challenges so that lives can be transformed into that of engaged and participatory citizens of whatever communities they exist in. Hence, my political theorization has been one that seeks to find theories that will extricate the downtrodden from their miserable station.

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