

Communitarianism, Personhood and Politics: Engaging with the Philosophy of Bernard Matolino

<https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ajct.v4i2.1>

Submission: May 6, 2024

Accepted: December 18, 2024

Mutshidzi MARAGANEDZHA

Department of Philosophy

North-West University, South Africa

Email: mutshidzi.maraganedzha@nwu.ac.za

ORCID No: 0000-0002-3428-2611

Introduction

Communitarianism, as a concept, holds significant importance in African conceptions of identity, impacting political structures, social organizations, interpersonal relationships, and ethical considerations. The root of communitarianism, though based on the way of life of many African peoples, can be traced back to the works of John Mbiti (1990) and Ifeanyi Menkiti (1984). These early proponents of communitarianism emphasized the primacy of the community over the individual and, thus, established a viewpoint that prioritized collective interests over individual rights. However, those who take this extreme perspective, neglecting individuality and associated rights, are often classified as radical communitarians. Radical communitarianism can be defined as a version of communitarianism that emphasizes the harmonious integration of community members while considering individual rights as less relevant (BOND 1996).

In contrast to radical communitarianism, Kwame Gyekye advocates for a moderate form of communitarianism that seeks to correct the flaws of the radical perspective –the seeming suppression of individual rights in favour of communal interest or the common good. Gyekye’s version of communitarianism “accords ...equal moral status to both the community and the individual...” (ANSAH & MENSAH 2018, 67). This implies that individuals are allowed the necessary space to exercise their rights. As a critic of radical communitarianism, he argues that the radical perspective is fundamentally flawed in its disregard for the individual and their

rights. Curiously, in making his argument, Gyekye paradoxically aligns himself with the very claim he criticizes radical communitarians for. Radical communitarians, such as Menkiti (1984), argue that personhood is acquired through participation in the community rather than being biologically given. This means that one's status as a person is contingent upon their active engagement and adherence to communal values and norms. Secondly, Gyekye (1997) acknowledges the possibility that the community can deny an individual their personhood if they have not possessed and observed certain communal virtues and norms. This implies that moderate communitarianism allows the community to restrict an individual's personhood based on their failure to meet communal expectations. By acknowledging these ideas, it becomes evident that Gyekye's moderate communitarianism has not fully transcended the theoretical grounds of radical communitarianism that he initially set out to critique. While he may present his perspective as a more balanced and inclusive approach, it still shares similarities with radical communitarianism in terms of the acquisition of personhood and the potential limitations imposed by the community.

In recent years, Bernard Matolino has proposed 'limited communitarianism' as an alternative to radical and moderate communitarianism. Matolino first introduced the concept of limited communitarianism in his book *Personhood in African Philosophy* (2015) and later expanded on it in his (2018) article, "Politics of Limited Communitarianism". In this article, he argues:

... the relationship between the constitutive features of a person, as an individual, and the reality of the sociality of the self, need not clash - at least for purposes of working out what the constitutive features of a person are. The reason why they need not clash is that they are not to be conceived as necessarily opposed or in some form of competition. Rather, they are to be conceived as if they were necessarily contemporaneous. (MATOLINO 2018, 110-111)

The above quote hints at the idea that there is no inherent tension between the individual and the community as one would have it in limited communitarianism. According to his observations, viewing these entities as inherently opposed to one another is not necessary.

Instead, Matolino proposes that we should conceive of the individual and the community as contemporaneous entities that coexist as equals. In this regard, there is no need to overemphasize the importance of one entity over the other.

Furthermore, Matolino's concept of 'limited communitarianism' (and his philosophy, generally speaking) aims to consider and interpret the realities of the current African experience, grounded in the postcolonial African context. Challenging the romanticized view of Africa and seeking to provide a more nuanced understanding of the African experience, Matolino aims to offer a more accurate and relevant framework for understanding African thought and views about communitarianism. It is against this backdrop that he presents his idea of limited communitarianism, focusing on several key aspects, like the discussion of human nature, its communal orientation, the relationship between individuals and the community, and the political orientation that aligns with the principles of limited communitarianism.

This special issue aims to investigate the complex landscape of communitarianism in African philosophy, with a particular focus on the heated debates surrounding radical, moderate, and limited communitarianism. At the heart of this project lies an in-depth exploration of Bernard Matolino's influential ideas and their significance within the African philosophical tradition. We will investigate how Matolino's work has informed contemporary African thinkers as they redefine the role of community in modern, multicultural societies. This involves navigating the intricate relationships between community, identity, social cohesion, and individual rights and examining the ethical and political implications of communitarianism in these contexts. By examining the intersections of communitarian thought and African social realities, we aim to provide a nuanced understanding of how community shapes individual and collective experiences in Africa.

This special issue is also crucial for understanding communitarianism in African philosophy. It explores various interpretations and their impacts. This special issue is significant for multiple reasons. First, it evaluates the application of communitarianism in modern Africa, tracks its evolution, and tests its relevance against today's challenges. Second, it poses questions about the future of communitarianism in African philosophy.

In his article, Mutshidzi Maraganedzha addresses the question of the nature of communitarianism/Afro-communitarianism. Maraganedzha and Matolino share a similar perspective regarding the nature of communitarianism/Afro-communitarianism and the essentialization of African thought in communal terms. Maraganedzha agrees with Matolino's view that insisting on a dogmatic account of the communitarian ontological reality that fails to reflect the current state of affairs in Africa is unwarranted. The tension between the 'essentialists and non-essentialists'¹ within communitarianism, as addressed by Maraganedzha, stems from the desire to defend African identity and offer an interpretation of African reality that differs from Western anthropological perspectives and worldviews.

The question of the difference between limited and moderate communitarianism arises in Lungelo Siphosethu Mbatha's analysis of limited communitarianism. In his theorization of Afro-communitarianism, Mbatha argues that, despite some similarities, both theories differ since the main proponents of both theories (Kwame Gyekye and Matolino) define "persons" and "community" differently and explain the relationship between persons and community differently.

On the question of the political agency of the individual in Afro-communitarianism, Tosin Adeate aligns with Matolino's perspective on the matter. Indeed, Adeate agrees that any form of communitarianism should be sensitive to the modern context and reflect the thoughts required to capture the current realities of African individuals and society. Diverging from traditional Afro-communitarianism, which emphasizes the primacy of the community in the conception of persons, limited communitarianism presents an account that prioritizes the rights of the individual and rejects the primacy of the community. Adeate's article aims to demonstrate that traditional Afro-communitarian theories can humiliate the individual, and he argues for pluralism as a solution to this humiliation. Adeate

¹ The essentialists say African identity is stable and rooted in traditional practices and values. They want to preserve African traditional values to counter Western influence and assert an authentic African worldview. Non-essentialists argue that African identity should be conceived as fluid, having been shaped by history and political changes that occurred with the encounter with Western influence (see MATOLINO 2011, 170).

also notes that limited communitarianism addresses the issue of communal humiliation by allowing individuals to express their agency.

Maduka Enyimba and Chukwuemeka Awugosi, on their part, are sympathetic to Matolino's limited communitarianism and argue for its practical applicability. Before discussing the practical applicability, they first seek to defend limited communitarianism against the central criticism of introducing individual autonomy and rights within the broader framework of communitarianism. Matolino addresses this criticism by arguing that the community and the individual should not be seen as perpetual adversaries. He claims that the relationship between the individual and the community is contemporaneous, suggesting that they are not inherently in conflict.

Finally, Motsamai Molefe and Elphus Muade, in their article "Ubuntu, Umuthu and Ubuntu: A Response to Matolino and Kwindiwi", disagree with Matolino's pronouncements about the impracticality of Ubuntu as a useful modern-day theory. In his article, Molefe and Muade argue that ubuntu and ubuntu ethics can serve as a foundation for constructing a robust polity. They see ubuntu as a conceptual, moral, and political resource that can contribute to the construction of a society that upholds human dignity.

In conclusion, I point the readers to some of the questions that remain underexplored in the discourse of limited communitarianism in African philosophy. What new contributions can be made to the various ideas about Afro-Communitarianism? In what ways has Matolino's intervention changed the trajectory of the theory of communitarianism? How different is limited communitarianism from liberal thought? What are the implications of limited communitarianism to political thought? What are the implications of limited communitarianism to ethics?

Relevant Literature

1. ANSAH, Richard., & MENSAH, Modestha. "Gyekye's Moderate Communitarianism: A Case of Radical Communitarianism in Disguise," [UJAH], pp62-87, 2018. Vol 19. No2.

2. BOND, Edward, J. [Ethics and Human Well Being], 1996. Blackwell Publishers.
3. GYEKYE, Kwame. [Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience], 1997. Oxford University Press: Oxford.
4. _____. "Person and Community in Akan Thought," [Person and Community: Ghanaian Philosophical Studies, I, Kwasi WIREDU & Kwame GYEKYE Eds.], pp101-122, 1992. Council for Research in Values and Philosophy: Washington, DC.
5. MATOLINO, Bernard. "Exorcising the Communitarian Ghost: DA Masolo's Contribution," [Quest: An African Journal of Philosophy], pp163-184, 2011. Vol 25. No1-2.
6. _____. "The Politics of Limited Communitarianism," [Filosofia Theoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religions], pp101-122, 2018. Vol 7. No2.
7. MBITI, John. S. [African Religions and Philosophy], 1990. Heinemann: Portsmouth.
8. MENKITI, Ifeanyi. "Person and Community in African Traditional Thought," [African Philosophy: An Introduction, Richard WRIGHT Ed.], pp171-182, 1984. University Press of America: Lanham.