

ON LIMITED COMMUNITARIANISM: MATOLINO'S THINKING AND THE CHANGING AFRICAN WORLD

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Abstract

In the corpus of African philosophy, Bernard Matolino has made a substantial contribution to the development of communitarian theory, offering a fresh perspective on the concept. While his predecessors, such as Ifeanyi Menkiti and Kwame Gyekye, proposed radical and moderate forms of communitarianism, Matolino argues that these accounts are inadequate in capturing the rapidly evolving African reality. For instance, Menkiti's radical communitarianism emphasized the community's role in shaping individual identity, whereas Gyekye's moderate approach sought to strike a balance between individual and communal interests. In response, Matolino introduces the concept of limited communitarianism, which acknowledges the dynamic nature of African societies and offers a more nuanced understanding of communitarianism. This concept recognizes that communities are not static entities but rather adapt to changing circumstances, and, thus, our understanding of communitarianism must also evolve. This article serves as a timely reminder to scholars and theorists of communitarianism to re-examine their assumptions and approaches to the African reality with a more nuanced and adaptable perspective. It underscores the importance of recognizing the complexities of our past, acknowledging the diversity of our present, and envisioning a future that is responsive to the changing needs and aspirations of African communities. By doing so, we can move beyond dogmatic and rigid interpretations of communitarianism and instead embrace a more inclusive and dynamic understanding of African reality.

Keywords: Limited communitarianism, Communitarianism, Personhood, Individual rights.

Introduction

The debate surrounding the nature of communitarianism is often formulated as the tension between the individual and the community. This tension is driven by the underlying assumption of a single ‘African identity’ and the desire to offer an interpretation of the African reality that differs from Western anthropological perspectives and worldviews. In Western philosophy, the concept of personhood often emphasizes the individual as a self-determining entity. The focus is on providing individuals with the freedom and autonomy to pursue self-actualization. While the Western perspective often places great importance on individual rights, agency, and self-realization, the African view presents a contrasting view of personhood, where the community is regarded as a fundamental contributor to individual identity and meaning (KAHAKA & MAUNDENI 2022). It is believed that the individual not only contributes to the community but also derives their sense of identity and meaning from it. The question of the individual’s position within (radical) Afro-communitarian theories has sparked a contentious debate within African philosophy.

On one side, some proponents argue that the community should be given priority and allowed to flourish, as its interests (which are, really, the interest of the collective) surpass those of the individual. On the other side, some advocates consider individual interests and rights as priorities over communal interests. According to Oritsegbugbemi A. Oyowe (2015), this viewpoint departs from the essential principles of communitarianism, which value communal well-being and interests over individual concerns. This controversy reflects the broader tension between communal values and individual autonomy.

While defending a salient idea of personhood in traditional African societies in his article “Person and Community in African Traditional Thought”, Menkiti (1984, 180) claims that “[i]n the African understanding, priority is given to the duties which individuals owe to the collectivity, and their rights, whatever these may be, are seen as secondary to their exercise of their duties”. In other words, Menkiti prioritizes duties over individual rights. This communitarian commitment came to be known as ‘radical’. Gyekye,

another influential African philosopher, was the first to identify and construe “radical communitarianism”, roughly, as a political system that fails to recognize certain individuals’ goods, dignity/rights, etc., outside of a relationship with the community (GYEKYE 1997, 36). In light of this, Gyekye proposes moderate communitarianism, which is conceived as a communitarian theory of personhood that is considered sensitive to individuals’ rights. He says his version should be preferred to the radical one because his version “accords ... equal moral status to both the community and the individual...” (ANSAH & MENSAH 2018, 67), and the implication is that the individual is allowed room to exercise his or her rights.

Gyekye argues that radical communitarianism is fundamentally flawed since it places the rights of the individual below those of the community. However, in doing so, he paradoxically commits himself to the same claim he criticizes radical communitarians for asserting (MATOLINO 2009). Gyekye’s moderate communitarianism shares many similarities with radical communitarianism, as both prioritize harmony, peace, stability, and solidarity. While Gyekye appears to acknowledge individual rights, he ultimately sides with Menkiti in giving precedence to the community’s well-being over these rights. He argues that individual rights can be limited to preserve social unity (GYEKYE 1997).

In recent years, Matolino (2014, 2018, 2022) has suggested ‘limited communitarianism’ as a replacement for the failed moderate communitarianism. As presented above, Matolino’s proposed version of communitarianism has been a point of contestation in the corpus of African philosophy. This article’s main aim is to provide an account of Matolino’s limited communitarianism and offer rebuttals to some of the leading criticisms of the view. I claim that a more charitable reading of limited communitarianism will reveal that many of its critiques have mostly misinterpreted the view. Limited communitarianism, as a philosophical stance, emphasizes that the relationship between the community and the individual should not necessarily be conceived as in contention with each other but as contemporaneous. Limited communitarianism is based on two foundational principles; the first principle acknowledges that there is more than one way to approach the notion of personhood. The second principle recognizes that personhood cannot be reduced to a purely communitarian or solely metaphysical understanding of how an

individual person is constituted. In order to meet the demands of the thesis, the first section will attempt to construct some philosophical concerns that appear to be guiding the debates about the individual-community relationship. The second section seeks to offer the development of the idea of limited communitarianism as envisaged by Matolino. The third and final section will respond to critics of Matolino's limited communitarianism, who argue that it 1) exceeds the boundaries of communitarian values and 2) has a liberal posture. This paper will then argue that these arguments are uncharitable to limited communitarianism.

Mapping the Issues

The debate on communitarianism has sparked controversy among African philosophers. Further, it has also created serious divisions, with concerns about how African philosophers ought to interpret the notion of communitarianism. To begin with, the debate on the nature of communitarianism started with Ifeanyi Menkiti. Menkiti is often associated with a radical form of communitarianism, which posits that personhood is inherently tied to one's social relationships and community integration. Menkiti (1984) argues that individual identity and moral status are contingent upon community recognition and participation. This view has sparked significant discourse on the compatibility of individual rights with communitarian needs. Critics like Gyekye (1997) and Matolino (2009) contend that Menkiti's perspective may diminish individual autonomy by prioritizing communal interests over individual rights. The first thinker to critic Menkiti's position is Kwame Gyekye (1997), who argues that while the community plays a crucial role in shaping individual identity, it is essential to recognize and protect individual rights. He posits that a healthy community must foster both individual autonomy and collective well-being.

Polycarp Ikuenobe (2018) is amongst those thinkers who have questioned Menkiti's conception of the relationship between the community and the individual. Ikuenobe was concerned with finding the balance between the individual and the community while acknowledging the community's role in shaping the individual identity. His work emphasizes the need for a nuanced understanding of personhood that incorporates both communal and individual dimensions. Finally, Oritsebubemi Oyowe (2015) further explores the

implications of communitarian thought for contemporary issues, such as human rights and social justice. He argues that Afro-communitarianism must evolve to address the complexities of modern society, including the need for individual rights within communal frameworks. Oyowe's perspective highlights the dynamic nature of communitarian discourse and its relevance to current socio-political challenges in Africa.

African philosophers, in their debate about the relationship between the individual and the community, have sought to contrast this African way of social relation with an allegedly foreign Western individualism that values individuality over communal cooperation in their argument. Hence, some scholars contend that Afro-communitarianism has inherent/indispensable characteristics that must be acknowledged when developing theories about African communitarianism. The indispensable characteristic of communitarianism is its emphasis on prioritizing the well-being of the community above individual autonomy, ensuring that the collective good takes precedence over personal interests. This core principle is rooted in the understanding that individual prosperity is inherently linked to the prosperity of the community as a whole. However, Menkiti, Oyowe, and Ani believe that a truly African political theory should place communal values ahead of individual interests. Matolino finds this to be problematic. Matolino, following Thadeus Metz, demonstrates why such assumptions are flawed. In his work, "African Political Philosophy", Metz reiterates that:

African philosophy is a developed body of work that differs noticeably from, Islamic, Anglo-American, Confucian philosophy, and hence merits a separate designation. However, in speaking of a political philosophy as "African", "Sub-Saharan", or the like, I am implying neither that certain themes and approaches are exclusive to the part of the world, so that literally no one else holds them, nor that they are exhaustive of thinkers below the Sahara, so that literally all of them hold the same views. Instead, I use these geographical labels to indicate that certain perspectives are salient in sub-saharan African thought in a way that they tended not to be elsewhere. (METZ 2015, 1)

The insight that emerges—when one closely reads the above paragraph—is that there is “...certain perspectives are salient in sub-Saharan African thought in a way that they tended not to be elsewhere” (METZ 2015, 1). The essence of the previous statement is that Metz is committed to the idea that there is something that is quite distinct about Africa or what makes Africa different from the rest of the world. This thinking creates a glorification of the past. In other instances, it can lead to the proposal of “returning to the source”¹. The problem with this is that it passes itself as if times do not change and communities do not change either. Matolino considers it troublesome to return to the past and interpret it as perfect and unchangeable when assessing Africans’ intellectual, political, and ethical outlook and output. Matolino contends that times change, communities evolve, and there is a need to go beyond the reference to the past. Matolino thinks that, while people might be inspired by the past, it is critical to avoid the misconception that the past is an unavoidable component of the present. This implies that Matolino questions the idea that the past should be the main basis for validating current political activities. However, Matolino does not entirely dismiss the idea that the present is connected to the past. He further states that:

... the situation in Africa [concerning the connections between the past, present and future] is slightly more complicated than the straight possibility of the interlink between the past and present. Africa has suffered from the effects of unsolicited attention from its more powerful colonizers. (MATOLINO 2019, 73)

Colonialism disrupted, as one might argue, the trajectory of Africa in terms of its development and values, which have not remained the same since this encounter. The infusion of colonial and African values has changed how African societies worked and also helped create a

¹ Returning to the source, as explained by Matolino (2017, 1), is “[t]he idea of returning to some known or interpreted historical fact of our past existence before the misfortunes of conquest were visited upon us is neither new nor scantily considered. It is an idea that is well documented with various reasons being offered in support of such a return. There are at least two aspects of that return that have been advanced. The first has to do with a revival of general modes of life and existence that are cast as genuine renditions of being African. The second aspect has to do with how these traditional modes can serve as an inspiration to our current stagnation”.

'new' Africa. It is odd that Oyowe and Ani still believe that there are distinct African features that make sub-Saharan African thought unique. In the theorization of communitarianism theory, for example, there has always been an insistence that a rigid type of communitarianism prioritizes the community over the individual. The disregard for the significance of the person in the interaction between the individual and the community is philosophically dubious and practically unsustainable.

Matolino, thus, argues against an exaggerated communitarianism that would endorse an authoritarian point of reference in defining the African and shaping African thought. Matolino (2017) further contends that African reality, both philosophical and communal, is in a constant state of transformation. He highlights that the social milieu and the communal experiences of individuals are subject to change over time. This challenges the essentialization of African reality as purely communitarian and calls for a more nuanced understanding of African political thought. In my reading of what drives the arguments on communitarianism, this picture will always be apparent. As a result, these are the concerns that I believe inform the communitarian discussion. It may be good to restate them: the first concern is maintaining the uniqueness of an 'African' identity. The second and final point is the emphasis on cultural differences between the 'West' and Africa.

Limited Communitarianism and the Essentialists

The Communitarian Essentialists

Matolino is dissatisfied with certain Afro-communitarian proponents' tendencies to silence the individuals' interests in a bid to satisfy the greater common good. The proponents of the more radical accounts of communitarianism argue that the community takes precedence over the individual (see MENKITI 2004; MARAGANEDZHA 2023). They emphasize the importance of community in shaping individual identities/personhood and believe that this should inform moral and political judgments. Hence, in my reading of Matolino, it is clear to me that he wishes to explore whether there is a conception of personhood that goes beyond the normative person. This question is essential in articulating the communitarian self, as it might help clarify some fundamental problems that exist within communitarianism. At the heart of communitarianism is the idea that the community's

interests take precedence over those of the individual. This is problematic because it stifles individual freedoms and self-actualization. Oyowe and Ani, including renowned thinkers like Menkiti, have subscribed to the idea that the community's interests outweigh individual rights and interests. In essence, the community's needs will always supersede those of the individual.

The question is, can we envisage an African view of personhood that is independent of the community, or, at least, takes the individual to be primary? The truth is that an individual is more than just a social being, and there are additional (ontological) qualities that might define him or her. In essence, besides being a social being, a person can necessarily be imagined without normative considerations. In his book, [Personhood in African Philosophy], Matolino suggested that the notion of personhood in Afro-communitarianism can be categorized into normative and metaphysical notions. Several proponents of Afro-communitarianism are comfortable with the normative conceptions of personhood. Hence, as Matolino (2014) notes, they also believe that the normative conception of personhood is an authentic African perspective of personhood that features intricate communitarian values. Matolino feels that this portrayal of personhood in African philosophy as strictly normative is not accurate. A more careful reflection on the matter would instead reveal that persons exhibit properties that are not only normative (or defined by normativity) but also exhibit ontological properties. This is demonstrated in Matolino's analysis of the grounds on which the communitarian view of a person is premised. Matolino demonstrates that:

...besides being social beings by nature human beings are other things by nature as well. [H]uman beings possess other features such as rationality and a capacity for virtue which enables them to make and evaluate moral judgments. This constitutes what [is] call[ed] 'mental features'. These mental features are not made by the community. This means that the community has only a partial role to play in the formation of the individual. Although the community plays a role in the realization of the individual's goal it is not an all encompassing affair. (MATOLINO 2014, 68)

The above quote suggests that human beings are social but also independent. Matolino argues that people have inherent traits, like rationality and moral judgment, that are not shaped by society. These traits imply limited community influence on personal development. While community aids in achieving goals, it does not define identity or personhood. Thus, personhood goes beyond communal values to include the individual's mental and moral abilities. This is also apparent when Matolino (2014, 68) says that “human beings possess other features such as rationality and a capacity for virtue which enables them to make and evaluate moral judgments”. In his attempt to show that the individual does possess some metaphysical features, Matolino invokes the Yoruba and Akan views on personhood, which is primarily ontological—due to space, I will limit my discussions here to the Yoruba scheme. Matolino is also quick to caution his readers not to carry the misconception that this ontological view is only peculiar to the Yorubas and the Akans or to West Africa in general. He states that “... any cultural group or clan on the continent can articulate a metaphysically biased notion of personhood. It is not a peculiar feature of Western Africans” (MATOLINO 2014, 73).

Matolino further seeks to demonstrate that the ontological elements are equally important in the pursuit of the attainment of Afro-communitarian personhood. In analyzing Segun Gbadegesin's (1991) Yoruba ontological view of personhood, Matolino makes the following points:

Firstly, it appears as if the two categories, which are the physical and mental/spiritual, are accorded equal importance in the construal of persons.... Secondly, this account is able to locate the origins of such things as thoughts and particular emotions that persons have from time to time. Not only are they identifiable with physical organs but those physical organs are seen as playing an important role in the production of non-physical phenomena. (MATOLINO 2014, 86)

This position, in Matolino's view, is in line with our intuition of what a human person essentially is.

Limited Communitarianism

Limited communitarianism prioritizes the metaphysical notion as the authoritative account of personhood. By focusing on the ontological elements that constitute a person and how they combine to form an entity, limited communitarianism sidesteps the complications of communitarian values and their role in determining a person's status. Limited communitarianism recognizes the importance of focusing on metaphysical accounts as a way of placing restrictions on the overreach of communitarianism in matters of personal identity. However, in the development of a political theory, the idea of community still plays a crucial role. The specificities of limited communitarianism, which is Matolino's version of Afro-communitarianism, acknowledge that individuals are persons by virtue of their constitutive features. The role of the community in the constitution of the individual is also recognized, particularly if the constitution is understood as strictly of a social nature.

There is no need to consider limited communitarianism to be in direct opposition to classical communitarianism, which asserts that the community takes precedence over individual rights. On this matter, Matolino (2018) argues that Limited communitarianism does not aim to contest or make judgments on traditional understandings of life. Instead, it acknowledges that these understandings are inherently social and consistent with the time and context in which they emerged, and that communitarianism is specific to the phase of the development of certain African communities that emphasize communal ethos. It is important to understand that limited communitarianism does not treat traditional understandings as eternally African but as expressions of a particular phase in African communities. These understandings are time-bound and reflect the prevalent communal ethos in those specific contexts. Even though limited communitarianism prioritizes and emphasizes the necessity of metaphysical explanation in determining a person's fundamental features. It does not, however, deny the community's role in affecting the individual, socially speaking. According to Matolino, limited communitarianism recognizes the community's indispensability in fulfilling the innate need for human contact, as well as the potential to arrange those relations to satisfy that need. The above suggests that, according to Matolino, Afro-communitarian viewpoints ought to value both the individual and the

community, which then results in the safeguarding of individual rights.

Limited Communitarianism and Its Critics

There are two primary criticisms leveled against Matolino's limited communitarianism. The first criticism against Matolino's limited communitarianism was advanced by Oritsegbugbemi Oyowe (2015) in his work "This Thing Called Communitarianism: A Critical Review of Matolino's Personhood in African Philosophy", where he argues that Matolino's theory fails to distinguish itself from traditional communitarianism and veers into liberalism. Oyowe's criticism of Matolino centers on the understanding that the community should be taken as a metaphysical entity, but one of the most problematic aspects of Oyowe's criticism is his insistence that Matolino must conform to an ontological or metaphysical understanding of community in African thought. To emphasize his point, Oyowe states that:

Matolino seems to say it is in the fact that, unlike its predecessors, limited Communitarianism removes the idea of community from the level of ontology; community is purely a social phenomenon. The claim here can be understood either as the idea that traditional communitarians reify the community or that the idea of community appears in their metaphysical talk about personhood whereas it is completely absent in limited Communitarianism. With respect to the former, Matolino is keen to point out that unlike traditional communitarians he does not subscribe to a reified notion of community. The community, he believes, is a set of conventions deliberately created by individuals. (OYOWE 2015, 513)

The idea that community is also metaphysical, even in discussions about personhood, makes it look like a community is an independent entity without individuals' interaction, alliance, and agreements. Indeed, Matolino believes, on this point, that the community "is a set of conventions deliberately created by individuals to serve the social needs of those individuals" (MATOLINO 2014, 184). He adds that "if this is the case then the reality of the community is temporal and not fixed" (MATOLINO 2014, 184). This is precisely what Matolino

rejects as unnecessarily rigid and outdated in a world where communities are no longer reified entities.

Matolino's conception of community as a temporal, socially constructed phenomenon reflects a deeper understanding of how communities function today, particularly in African urban environments where identities and social ties are constantly in flux. This temporal view of community is not a failure to engage with the metaphysical discourse of personhood; it is a deliberate shift away from the community that, in Matolino's view, is no longer tenable or relevant to contemporary lived experiences. It is worth noting that Matolino's position on the community as a set of conventions created to serve social needs is not a dismissal of the community's importance but an acknowledgment that its role must be understood within specific, mutable contexts. Matolino does not deny that personhood can involve communal relationships; instead, he insists that the individual is not bound ontologically to the community in a metaphysical sense. Oyowe's insistence on metaphysical communitarianism in his attempt to undermine Matolino's theory requires strict adherence to a static traditional framework of communitarianism, which is the very issue Matolino seeks to avoid in his theory. The other criticism that Oyowe levels against Matolino is that despite his claim to novelty, Matolino's limited communitarianism is not new at all. To demonstrate that Matolino's limited communitarianism is not new, Oyowe states:

In the end, however, what we have is not a new conception at all. It is simply a reference to the Akan, Yoruba and other culture specific accounts of personhood. And to this reference is added a statement on the primacy thesis in favour of the individual. Until more details are provided, it is hard to see how this is a new concept of personhood. Limited Communitarianism, it seems to me, must identify, as a start, ontological constitutive elements of personhood that do not bear communal features for it to be sufficiently distinguished from what is already available in the literature. (OYOWE 2015, 514)

Oyowe's criticism that Matolino's account is not a 'new conception' of personhood and that Matolino's view simply reiterates existing

ideas misses a crucial point. My reading of Matolino's project aimed not to invent a novel concept of personhood, but rather to demonstrate that African thought acknowledges personhood as having ontological and social dimensions. This distinction is vital, as it highlights the nuances of personhood in African philosophy.

Oyowe further argues that a crucial point of difference between Matolino's limited Communitarianism and its rivals is that while the latter variously claim that the community takes precedence over the individual, Matolino holds that the individual takes precedence. The corollary, of course, is that individual rights take precedence over duties. This also implies that, for Matolino, the metaphysical aspect of personhood carries more weight vis-à-vis the communitarian aspect. All this is good. But Matolino still needs to work out in what non-trivial sense his account of personhood is then supposed to be communitarian. In fact, Matolino's work pushes Afro-communitarianism into new territory by emphasizing the individual's primacy over the community without completely abandoning the communal framework. Matolino's project can be said to be marking a departure from the traditional communitarian position, where the community takes precedence, and the individual is largely subsumed into the collective.

The second criticism against Matolino's limited communitarianism was advanced by Ani (2022) in his work, "Afro-communitarianism or Cosmopolitanism", which posits that Matolino's theory exceeds the boundaries set by communitarian values. Ani argues that Matolino's strong focus on individual rights leads to a mistake in the communitarianism debate. Matolino's, according to Ani, emphasis on individual rights makes him overlook the key idea of communitarianism, which puts the community's well-being above individual rights. Ani (2022, 352) further states that "[t]he fact that one contributed to a debate about communitarianism does not automatically make one's contribution a communitarian theory".

However, this accusation misinterprets Matolino's nuanced approach, which blends elements of liberalism and communitarianism to create a context-sensitive Afro-communitarianism. This approach balances individual rights with communal rights, avoiding the extremes of both views. Another misconception is Ani's assertion that "...Matolino prioritizes the individual over the community..." (ANI

2022, 351). Matolino does not advocate for absolute individual rights as liberalism does. Instead, he envisions a dynamic interplay between individuals and communities, where each entity influences the other. This perspective is rooted in African thought, which rejects the idea that either the individual or the community should have unconditional primacy. Matolino's endorsement of Eze's (2008, 115) concept of "contemporaneity" reinforces this reciprocal ethic, where individuals and communities acknowledge and value each other's existence. The categorization of this perspective as liberal is a misguided imposition of Western views, which overlook Matolino's African philosophical foundations. Ani erroneously assumes and reads Matolino as prioritizing the metaphysical aspects of the self over the social aspects. Hence, when Ani (2022, 351) states that "...if Matolino regards other aspects of the self as having priority over the sociality of the self, then Matolino's theory is closer to liberalism than to communitarianism", the claims made become the starting point for multiple misinterpretations of the core argument and position that Matolino's limited communitarianism strives to establish. Recall that Matolino's primary objective in examining the complexities of personhood was to showcase that it encompasses more than just social aspects; instead, it has metaphysical foundations that shape our understanding of the self. This concept, far from being a distant philosophical idea, is closely tied to individuals' innate intuitions about their own identities. For instance, when reflecting on one's existence, people often sense that their being extends beyond their social roles, relationships, and cultural backgrounds.

Matolino's argument builds upon this intuitive understanding, suggesting that external factors do not solely define personhood, but also has an inherent, metaphysical substance that gives it depth and richness. By recognizing this multifaceted nature of personhood, we can better appreciate the nuances of human existence and how individuals interact with and influence one another.

The second charge that Ani makes is that Matolino rejects the community's right to abridge individual rights (thus, making Matolino's theory liberal) (see ANI 2022, 351-352). Here, I say that Ani has ignored the unique context when criticizing Matolino. Matolino's theory does not go beyond the parameters of communitarianism. For instance, when Matolino criticizes Gyekye's moderate communitarianism for allowing the community to override

individual rights, he does not reject the importance of the community altogether. Rather, he is arguing for more balance between the individual and the community, one that does not resort to coercion. This does not mean Matolino abandons the community entirely; instead, he reconfigures it in a way that avoids authoritarianism and respects the individual's rights and agency. This should not be conceived as liberalism—but as a thoughtful attempt to create a form of communitarianism that respects both communal values and individual dignity, without subjugating one to the other.

The third charge that Ani makes is that Matolino's communitarianism lacks a clear role for the community. This criticism, in my opinion, is also misguided. Matolino is not silent about the importance of community—he simply rejects a model that would allow the community to enforce conformity or abridge individual rights. This does not negate the community's value in shaping individual identity, providing moral guidance, or fostering a sense of belonging. What Matolino opposes is the idea that the community has an unquestionable moral authority to suppress dissent or individuality in the name of tradition or social cohesion. This is a critical distinction that places him in the camp of modern communitarians who are grappling with how to preserve communal values in a world where individual rights and freedoms are increasingly recognized. Matolino's theory, far from being liberal, is a sophisticated attempt to reconcile these tensions within the framework of African communitarianism.

The fourth charge is that Matolino's definition of communitarianism is too broad—that it could encompass individualism and misrepresent his intentions. Matolino's definition that communitarianism is fundamentally about the relationship between individuals and the community is rooted in African philosophy and reflects the deeply relational nature of personhood within this tradition. The suggestion that this definition could apply equally to individualism overlooks the distinctiveness of the African context in which the individual is always embedded in a web of social relationships. While Matolino acknowledges the individual's right to question or reject certain community values, he does not advocate for a detached, atomic individualism. Instead, he envisions a form of communitarianism where both the community and the individual engage in a constant dialogue, shaping each other's moral and ethical

outlooks. Matolino recognizes that in African philosophical discourse, the label of liberalism carries a specific connotation that could distract from the communal aspects of his theory. By carefully navigating this distinction, Matolino ensures that his work remains firmly rooted in African philosophical traditions while also engaging with contemporary ethical challenges. His avoidance of the liberal label is thus a strategic move to preserve the integrity of his communitarian theory, not a sign of weakness.

Finally, Ani's critique that Matolino's theory is cosmopolitanism in disguise ignores the unique African grounding of his communitarianism. While Matolino advocates for global solidarity and recognizes the interconnectedness of humanity, these ideas do not negate his commitment to Afro-communitarianism. As noted earlier, African philosophy has long emphasized the relational nature of human existence, and this naturally extends to a global context. Matolino's vision of world solidarity is not a departure from communitarianism but an expansion of it, recognizing that communities are no longer isolated but intertwined in today's world. His theory remains deeply rooted in the politics and structures of communitarianism, even as it addresses the realities of globalization. Matolino's Afro-communitarianism is neither liberalism—the sentiments that Matolino's theory is liberalism are also shared by Oyowe — nor a disguised form of cosmopolitanism. It is a thoughtful, context-sensitive reimagining of communitarianism that respects both individual agency and communal values. Matolino's emphasis on the reciprocal relationship between the individual and the community does not undermine the communitarian framework but enriches it, making it more adaptable to the challenges of contemporary life. His work represents a significant contribution to African philosophical thought, offering a model of communitarianism that is both ethically robust and responsive to the complexities of a globalized world.

Matolino's theory not only aims to address the question of individual-community interaction but also provides insights into the character of Afro-communitarianism. If we try to analyze the nature of communitarianism without bias, then we may see that Matolino's stance has an excellent chance of answering the question of individual-community interaction. This can be seen in Matolino's elucidations when he states:

...as a result of the prioritization of the metaphysical orientation of personhood, strict limits are placed on the communitarian account's ability to determine the constitutive marks of personhood. As a result of these limits, which are of a metaphysical nature, the communitarian doctrine is specified as a regulator of the sociality of individuals. However, this sociality, is not of a predeterministic form but a result of deliberate and well-intended actions of individual actors who seek to respond to factors in their environment and seek to satisfy meaningful suspicions they might have of what society amounts to when in service of individual and collective needs. (Matolino 2018, 119)

This paragraph is insightful in revealing the potentially reasonable character of Afro-communitarianism. A properly interpreted position of Afro-communitarianism should not disregard the ontological constitution of personhood, but it should acknowledge that a person is a social being. Matolino argues that the communitarian doctrine should be seen as a regulator of the sociality of individuals rather than a rigid and predetermined idea. The theory emphasizes that sociality is not predetermined but is the result of the deliberate and well-intended actions of individual actors who respond to factors in their environment and seek to satisfy individual and collective needs. He argues for a limited communitarianism that recognizes different formulations of community, whether loose and coincidental (as in marginalized communities like shanty town dwellers and migrant laborers) or tight-knit rural communities. Matolino asserts that what is most important is recognizing these different senses of community as contributing to the construction of a multifaceted and vibrant African reality, which is responsive to an African construal of reality.

From the preceding, two objections can be raised; the first is that Matolino fails to provide a broader definition of Afro-communitarianism. I acknowledge that he does not attempt to do so in his theorization of the community-individual relationship. However, as illustrated earlier, it can be inferred from his explanation of the concept of person that he is also concerned with defining Afro-communitarianism. This is why his theory avoids presenting itself as a strictly liberal stance. Matolino's theory acknowledges that personhood has both social and ontological aspects, suggesting that

we look at personal traits while limiting the community's role in the constitution of a person. Although he does not explicitly define communitarianism, his theory implies a different understanding of Afro-communitarianism. I believe his limited communitarianism better balances individual and community needs than other theories.

The second counterargument comes from those who label Matolino's theory as liberal. This criticism is not new, but addressing it from a different angle could help. Critics seem to support a strict version of communitarianism. This view is flawed. Communities change over time. They adapt in values and key aspects. A rigid view of communitarianism is dogmatic and falls apart under scrutiny. In defending Matolino, these counterarguments highlight the strengths of limited Communitarianism in tackling personhood and community issues in modern African thought. Matolino sees Afro-communitarianism as avoiding community dominance over individuals. Instead, it redefines community roles in relation to individuals. It recognizes the changing nature of communities and the need for individual space. This understanding of fluid roles in personhood makes his limited communitarianism a vital part of African philosophy.

Conclusion

This article opted to accomplish two intertwined objectives: first, it aimed to rebuttal critics of limited communitarianism. It has been argued that Oyowe and Ani, who believe that limited communitarianism transcends boundary communitarianism, are blind to the fact that they are essentialists, who have advocated for a rigid and unchanging kind of Afro-communitarianism. Second, it aimed to provide a cursory characteristics of the nature of Afro-communitarianism; (1) being sensitive to both the individual and community in the debate between the community and the individual, it has also been demonstrated that limited communitarianism can provide a new path for the communitarian project in African philosophy;(2) The idea that communitarianism, as an African reality, is a prompt for change rather than a static state with some notable characteristics that set Africa apart from the rest of the world. Thus, I believe that people who insist on this unchangeable Afro-communitarianism are motivated by blind partiality and are committed to some form of philosophical bankruptcy. Finally, in

response to the question of unchanging Afro-communitarianism, I have indicated that if a community is prompt to change, there is a need to conceptualize communitarianism more nuancedly, which would reveal the new African reality we are experiencing now. Perhaps doing so will assist us in addressing the challenges that Africans are currently facing.

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