

BOOK REVIEW

A page in African ethics: A review of Bernard Matolino's *Personhood in African philosophy*

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One of the most difficult intellectual problems which humans have over the ages sought to resolve is the question of personal identity. And in disparate philosophical systems, including the African, reflections on personhood have sometimes taken an ethical or religious turn, or both. For this reason, Bernard Matolino's 191-page book, *Personhood in African philosophy* is useful to philosophers, ethicists and religious thinkers. The fact that the book was published by a company which seeks to promote contemporary theology solidifies my observation. This book is well-written and the quality of the ideas expressed in it is good. It discusses many of the most important concerns and disputes over personhood – especially, regarding the ethical foundations of personhood – in African philosophical thought. It is rather surprising that this book has not been sufficiently reviewed by scholars or received adequate attention on the continent, although Matolino is a well-known South African philosopher.

Matolino carries out his discussion in five chapters. Chapter one explores the nature of personhood with special focus on the “three theses” of Didier Kaphagawani and the “two conceptions”

of Polycarp Ikuenobe. The three theses on personhood identified by Kaphagawani are:

- a). The force thesis which he identifies with Placide Tempels;
- b). The shadow thesis which he attributes to Alexis Kagame; and
- c). The communalist thesis which he associates with John Mbiti. (Matolino, pp. 3-4)

However, Matolino criticizes Kaphagawani for labeling the conception of personhood which “outlines essential attributes” of a person as West African, arguing that this conception also makes sense to the non-West African (p. 4). Contrary to Kaphagawani’s thinking, Matolino suggests that Tempels’ position should rather be understood as communalist (pp. 7-11). On Ikuenobe’s two conceptions of personhood – the “normative” and “metaphysical or descriptive” (p. 28) – Matolino seems to generally welcome the classification, although he disagrees with the characterization of the metaphysical as descriptive. Matolino (p. 29), then, aptly maintains that “metaphysics is a far more serious category” in philosophy.

Chapter two examines the basis of the communitarian view of personhood. Following Matolino’s statement above concerning the communalist character of Tempels’ argument, he is in this chapter able to discuss the argument extensively. That which is of utmost importance to the Bantu, according to Tempels, is force or life or vital force (Tempels, 1959, p. 30), which is “a feeling of being at the apex of life through fortunes of good health and sound social relations” (Matolino, p. 37). By sound social relations, the Bantu is expected to lead an ethical life which eventually will earn him a status in the community as a *person*. This means that personhood is an ethical concept. To a large extent, nonetheless, Tempels’ explication of the Bantu concept of being as “force” does not only seem unjustifiably mystical to Matolino but is also a “distortion” of Bantu thinking since Tempels does not give any word in Bantu which stands for

“force” (Matolino, p. 39). Nevertheless, Matolino’s designation of the force thesis as communitarian is primarily because it puts the individual “under a permanent injunction to behave in a manner that is beneficial to the community of forces” (p. 44). The community, then, is both a “social fact” and a “constitutive identity” of the individual (p. 46). It is easy to observe that this perspective on the individual is common among many African cultures, including the Akan. The prominent Akan philosophers Kwasi Wiredu and Kwame Gyekye express the same ideas about Akan social set-up (Wiredu, 1996, p. 159; Gyekye, 1997, p. 38). Mbiti substantially maintains the communitarian ideas of Temples and suggests that even the African kinship system encompasses the living-dead (pp. 51-52). It is noteworthy that this suggestion about the living-dead – referred to as *nananom nsamanfo* (Majeed, 2015, p. 110) – is also held in Akan thought. Two West African philosophers, Ifeanyi Menkiti and Gyekye, have discussed communitarianism in “rigid” and “moderate” forms respectively, and this has been confirmed by Majeed (2017, p. 32). But Matolino notably points out that the rigid and moderate forms are not as different as their names suggest (pp. 66-68).

The metaphysical conception of a person is tackled in chapter three with particular focus on the Yoruba and Akan schemes. This conception is discussed as distinct from and projected as equal in importance to the communitarian view which is projected in some circles as the “authentic” African conception of personhood (Matolino, pp. 72, 75). Matolino further rejects the attempts made by some philosophers to explain the former as part of the latter (pp. 77, 81). These rejections set the tone for Matolino to analyse the selected metaphysical schemes with clarity. In Yoruba philosophical thought, the concept of *eniyan* (person, as a matter of “strict identity”) contrasts with *omoluwabi* (person, as a matter of “ethics/sociality”). In terms of the metaphysical sense, *eniyan*, an individual possesses spiritual and physical attributes even though some parts of the body are also said to perform spiritual roles; *okan* (heart) and *ori* (head) are examples (p. 85). On the basis of this,

Matolino questions why Gyekye postulates purely metaphysical entities like *okra* (bearer of life) in Akan philosophical scheme given that both schemes are African. He writes, Gyekye's

characterization of the *okra* as essentially non-spatial is a departure from African thought. Such a departure is not bad only if it is to be supported by some evidence to show that the departure is warranted and that the new suggestion has good basis in the metaphysical outlook of African thought. That is not the case with Gyekye's suggestion. (p. 95)

By relying on such Akan philosophers as Abraham and, more especially, Wiredu, Matolino lends his support to the view that *okra* must be quasi-physical (p. 96). Again, Gyekye's characterization of *sunsum* as being fully spiritual may be incorrect because *sunsum* has some physical attributes and is thus quasi-physical (pp. 101-102).

Matolino shows in chapter four how communitarians get their argument wrong. He rejects the view that communitarianism is the authentic African perspective on personhood since many Africans like him who do not live in rural, traditional communities do not have communitarian identities at all (p. 134). On the whole, communitarianism is anachronistic (p. 120). He also rejects communitarianism because of its inherent category mistake: the mistake of misconstruing "the question of what persons ought to be as moral agents who are conceived in a communitarian set-up" as "the question of what persons are as ontological entities" (p. 143).

One may, however, wonder whether the communitarian's discussion of the ideals of communitarianism suggests that he or she is oblivious of the current reality that urban life does not often display or perfectly portray communitarian living, as Matolino claims. It does not seem to me as if the communitarian was seeking to thrust a communitarian mode of identity on every African that is seeking to define who he or she is. If the communitarian could be understood to be drawing or urging us to draw moral lessons from the traditional society, then, that would not necessarily

suggest that he or she expects the average urban dweller to possess a communitarian identity in advance. Even in a rural setting, not everyone achieves or cares to achieve a communitarian identity of personhood.

Nevertheless, Matolino's *Personhood in African philosophy* is educative. It also offers an in-depth analysis of the concept of personhood. It is a book that ought to be read by researchers on African philosophy, religion, and society.

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