



A Re-Reading of Gyekye's Moderate Communitarianism

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ABSTRACT

Recent African political philosophers do not imagine that traditional African societies were highly individualistic. Basing themselves on the oral tradition regarding traditional societies they maintain that private property was not concentrated in the hands of a few privileged people. As opposed to radical communitarianism, Gyekye characterizes traditional African societies as having been moderately communitarian. Reflecting on my own traditional Basotho society, I contend that it was socialist by character. I further argue that socialism entails the use of markets. I also make a case for incorporating market socialism in Lesotho, depending on whether Lesotho can successfully retain social values lost because of the imposition of capitalism by colonizers.

INTRODUCTION

I will briefly define the two political theories discussed in this paper. On the one hand, communitarianism is a political theory that maintains the view that in the lexical order the community is prior to the individual. The implication being that both the community and individuals are important, but the community is more important. In other words, while the rights of the community and individuals deserve respect, in the case of conflict of rights, the rights of the community override rights of individuals. Even in his mitigated form of communitarianism Gyekye too maintains that the nature of communitarianism is such that 'it assumes a great concern for communal values, for the good of the wider society as such (Gyekye, 1997: 65).

Regarding socialism, I share Heywood's claim that "Socialism... contains a bewildering variety of divisions and rival traditions" (Heywood, 2007: 99). Faithfulness to my commitment in this paper impels me to avoid the debates regarding rival traditions within socialism but rather to define the brand of socialism I classify myself under.

Socialism is a political theory that posits equal emphasis on liberty and equality. While acknowledging the importance of liberty of individuals, socialists also assert the importance of the equality of human beings. It is important to note that by 'equality' socialists refer to both political equality

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and economic equality. It is the inclusion of economic equality in the constitution of socialism that justifies its claim to be strongly egalitarian.

The socialist claim that economic equality is an essential constituent of socialism has led some liberals, especially libertarian liberals to think that socialism undermines the importance of liberty. But, as a matter of fact, socialists are pioneers in the struggle for liberty for all. For example, Fried and Sanders have this to say about the three founders of the modern socialist tradition:

What they all had in common was a sense of the inadequacy of unadulterated liberalism which resulted in such caricatures of human liberty... for Fourier and Owen, as well as for the social democratic movements of more recent times, the task was to redistribute liberty so that it could be enjoyed by all (Fried and Sanders, 1964: 127).

In their struggle for distributive justice intended to reduce economic inequalities, they also fought strenuously for liberty that was only enjoyed by the chosen few, namely, the capitalists. Owen, in England, while setting as his primary task to combat the alarming economic conditions of the workers, also regarded as his other primary duty to be in the forefront in the struggle for universal liberty. In France, St. Simon was also known as the “apostle of liberty” because of his unshakeable standpoint view on redistribution of liberty that ought to be enjoyed by all.

Gyekye and radical African communitarians

Gyekye holds that social structures of African societies and cultures were characterized by communal features. Mbiti's quoted proverb “I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am” (Mbiti, 1970: 141), clearly stipulates that an individual's identity derives from the community. Menkiti's follow up from Mbiti that “as far as Africans are concerned, the reality of the communal world takes precedence over the reality of the individual life histories, whatever these may be” (Menkiti, 1984: 171), depicts a radical communitarianism that suppresses individual autonomy. The individual in radical communitarianism is not self-ruled but ‘other’-ruled.

African communitarianism and (American communitarianism – shortly to be discussed below) that Gyekye claims to be radical stems from the Greek social harmonious unity. In his *Republic*, Plato's social harmonious unity is such that, whilst not rejecting individualistic values, it espouses communal values. Aristotle expressly states that “the state is by nature clearly prior to the family and to the individual, since the whole is of necessity prior to the part” (Ross, 1927: 288). The priority of the political community means that an individual is not self-sufficient apart from the polis. Highlighting the superiority of the political community, Aristotle maintains that an individual incapable of being part of a polis is either a brute or a god. Just as the body is prior to its parts, so is the political community to its individuals.

Gyekye discusses his African radical communitarians as if their view ruled out individualism completely. Gyekye's repeated citation of Mbiti's

proverb that 'I am, because we are; and since we are therefore I am', has given him the ground that Mbiti and those who think likewise advocate for a radical communitarianism. But I think that these African communitarians (if traditional African societies were communitarian) mistakenly ignored other proverbs that attest to the space allotted to individualism in their own traditional societies respectively. What characterizes a theory to be referred to as communitarian is just that it prizes communal values, not that it undermines individual rights completely.

With his moderate communitarianism that accords due recognition to individuality, Gyekye thinks that equal moral standing can be ascribed to individualism and communalism. But the 'logic of the communitarian theory' (to use Gyekye's terminology) is such that it regards communal rights to be more important than individual rights. With his new form of communitarianism Gyekye holds that, it must be granted that moderate communitarianism cannot be expected to be obsessed with rights. The reason, which is not far to seek, derives from the logic of the communitarian theory itself: it assumes a great concern for communal values, for the good of the wider society as such (Gyekye, 1997: 65).

Whether moderate or radical, communitarianism, as I have explained, and, as Gyekye's above cited quotation also attests, is a political theory that the community can have rights that are independent of the rights of the individuals. The implication is that Gyekye's saying that "the moderate communitarian view suggests that the claims of individuality and communality ought to be equally morally acknowledged" (Gyekye, 1997: 66), is hardly possible. This passage and the above cited clearly show that Gyekye commits the fallacy of inconsistency when he exposes and further clarifies his moderate communitarianism. At first he emphasizes that the logic of the communitarian theory is such that it accords priority to communal values, and later he stresses that individual rights and communal rights must be acknowledged equally. Communitarianism is a theory that is sharply opposed to rights-oriented liberalism. Communitarianism prizes the values of the community above the values of individuals. A communitarian theory that regards individuality and communality as being on an equal footing ceases to be communitarian, it becomes something else.

Gyekye and radical American communitarians

According to Gyekye, American radical communitarians have failed to place communality and individuality on equal moral levels. With his moderate communitarianism that accords due recognition to individuality, Gyekye thinks that equal moral standing can be ascribed to individualism and communalism.

About American communitarians, Gyekye holds that these "radical communitarian thinkers generally tend to exaggerate the impact of history and cultural and communal structures on the exercise by the communal self of his moral or intellectual autonomy" (Gyekye, 1997: 61). According to

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Gyekye, the claim of both individuality and communality is not adequately reflected in radical communitarianism. He holds that Sandel's unmitigated communitarianism regards the community as being prior to individual autonomy. He cites Sandel's viewpoint that:

As a self-interpreting being, I am able to reflect on my history and in this sense to distance myself from it, but the distance is always precarious and provisional, the point of reflection never finally secured outside the history itself (Sandel, 1982: 179).

According to Gyekye, this unrestricted or rather unmitigated form of communitarianism maintains that the person is wholly defined by the communal structure. He holds that Sandel cherishes this unmitigated form of communitarianism (Gyekye, 1997: 59-60).

But I have argued that Sandel is not a communitarian since he does not accord priority of the good over the right (Manyeli, 2008: 350-352). Sandel is simply reacting against a view that construes rights independently of the good, a view that ends up according priority of the right over the good. In short, Gyekye fails to grasp the context in which his American communitarian (if they are communitarian) thinkers write. They are reacting against the liberal view that is exclusively monadological. Their reaction against an exclusively individualistic view must not be understood as implying an exclusion of individuality. Communitarianism referred to as either moderate or radical is such that it prices communality over individuality as long as it is communitarian.

Gyekye gives a chain of Akan proverbs (Gyekye, 1997: 40-41) that espouse individualistic values as proof that his moderate communitarianism espousal of communal values does not imply the rejection of individualistic values. But communitarianism is not a theory that rejects individualistic values. Individual rights are still respected in a communitarian society. What characterizes a society to be communitarian is its claim that communal rights are more valuable than the rights of individuals; and that in cases of conflict, communal rights must prevail. For Gyekye,

The pursuit of the politics of the common good may not require excessive insistence or emphasis on individual rights, which often lie at the foundation of individual claims and counter-claims and elevate the value of justice to a status (Gyekye, 1997: 70).

Gyekye's recognition and acceptance of individual values still requires him to posit excessive insistence on communal values as long as he claims to be a communitarian. What liberals and communitarians have in common is that they both give due recognition to individual and communal values. The difference lies in that while liberals put excessive emphasis on individual rights, communitarians posit excessive stress on communal values.

Against the right-wing liberals, Rawls attempts to moderate his theory. But since liberalism is such that it regards individual rights as being prior to communal rights, Rawls restates the liberal view that individual rights cannot be infringed upon for the sake of communal rights. Rawls "... clearly stipulates that the priority of liberty is such that it can be restricted only for

the sake of liberty, not for the sake of economic or social gain (Rawls, 1971: 303). For Rawls, the right to personal property is a fundamental liberty, and if it is restricted for the sake of economic and social gain, it is violated” (Manyeli, 2005: 194). In like manner, Gyekye attempts to mitigate communitarianism. But the above cited passage from Gyekye clearly demonstrate that regardless of his endeavour to construe a new version of communitarianism, the logic of the communitarian theory still regards communal rights as being prior to individual rights.

Traditional Basotho Society and Socialism

Some may argue that since the term ‘socialism’ was unknown in traditional Lesotho society I am not justified to classify that society as having been socialist. My claim of characterizing it as having been socialist is based on my studies of the way of the life of traditional Basotho people and socialism itself. It is these studies that have led me to associate traditional Basotho society with socialism.

I want to start by restating more elaborately the version of socialism that corresponds with the way of life of the traditional Basotho people. Gaus writes thus of those who misinterpret socialism:

It has often been said that one of the great debates in political theory is between proponents of liberty and of equality. Now, since liberals place liberty in a supreme position, relegating equality to secondary status, it may seem that as standard bearers of equality, socialists would simply reverse this priority, upholding equality over liberty. Although this may well have been a characteristic of early socialist theories, it is not a feature of recent socialists (Gaus, 2000: 49-50).

Those who think that socialism places equality in a supreme position, relegating liberty to secondary status, distort it. Equality and liberty are two essential constituents of socialism. Like liberals, socialists too are proponents of liberty, especially liberty for the suppressed masses, and I am not aware of a period in the history of socialism where it ever placed equality in a supreme position, relegating liberty to secondary status. Socialists do not reverse the priority by upholding equality over liberty. Rather, they regard equality and liberty as essential constituents of socialism.

Fundamental to socialism is the claim that liberty and equality are mutually supportive and reciprocal. Nielsen correctly maintains that liberty requires equality (Nielsen, 1985: 201), in particular, an equality of power. “Freedom and equality, far from being opposed ideals, actually coincides” (Norman, 1987: 133). Some may question whether in practice equality and liberty can easily be compatible. The answer to this important question is that that equality and liberty can be compatible is normative just as the liberal claim that fundamental human rights must always be respected is normative. If liberals have reasons to support their claim why fundamental individual human rights must always be respected, it is imperative for them to continue pursuing that even if in practice that is not fully realizable. Similarly, the

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same applies to socialists with regard to the compatibility of equality and liberty.

As a matter of fact, I agree with socialists when they regard equality as a necessary means for attaining liberty. Relegating economic equality to secondary status results in inequality in liberty, and “This involves inequality in freedom of choice: all are free but some are freer than others” (Macpherson, 1965: 7). Poverty that socialism seeks to eradicate is a serious impediment that restricts liberty. In arguing for a coincidence of liberty and equality, socialists correctly make a case for a strongly egalitarian society with unrestricted freedom. If this is desirable, there is no reason why it should not be pursued.

In traditional Lesotho society basic liberties were respected. However, given that it was a patriarchal society, rights of women were to a great extent overlooked. People laboriously worked cooperatively, especially in agriculture to reduce economic inequalities as far as possible. This was accomplished through ‘matsema’, where well off people worked with those who were least advantaged. This enabled the latter group to become better off. Thus, liberty and equality were ideal goals pursued collectively.

Market Socialism

Identification of socialism with communism makes it hard for one to conceive or even think of socialism moving in the direction of “market” socialism. But, Marx himself clearly distinguished the two. He regarded socialism as the necessary second stage after capitalism leading to the third and last stage, namely, communism. Marx and Engels conceived the market as the platform of corruption where capitalists exploited the workers. One leading contemporary Marxist correctly observes that “The Marxist classics repeatedly underline that the market is a poorly operating coordination mechanism that must be replaced by conscious planning” (Kornai, 1992: 475). Discontent about the market, Marx holds that “... the peasant family produced the means of subsistence and the raw materials... the raw materials and means of subsistence have now become commodities; the larger farmer sells them, he finds his market in manufactures” (Marx 1954: 699). In order to understand market socialism, it is important, therefore, to dissociate Marxism from socialism. That market socialism is profoundly alien to Marx and the thinking communist classics, is not my concern here, rather, my interest lies solely on socialism and market socialism.

It is worth noting also that it is wrong to confine markets to capitalism. Pierson observes that “Markets have commonly been identified with capitalism, private property and the economic sovereignty of the individual, whilst socialism has been seen to be premised upon social ownership of property and the planned and communal use of economic resources” (Pierson, 1995: 80). Pierson correctly refutes this serious distortion of socialism by maintaining that “Almost all practical experience of socialism, aside from a

few shortlived utopian experiments, has entailed the use of markets” (Pierson, 1995: 80).

Tracing socialism from its beginning, for example, in France and England, socialists have always advocated for a political economy of market socialism. Discontent with the exploitation of the workers by the exclusively selfish capitalists, socialists are pioneers in proposing general socialization of capital ownership in view of abolishing large-scale holdings of private capital. Thus, socialism is in line with its ideal goal of economic equality, and its other end of full exercise of political citizenship.

As a matter of fact, socialism accommodated private ownership in pre-colonial Lesotho society. People had their own fields and possessed private property. At the same time they worked cooperatively to a large extent to reduce economic inequalities. Virtues such as generosity, compassion, benevolence, and concern for others were highly recommendable. As a sharing political community endowed with the above mentioned virtues, my society, as it existed in antiquity espoused more the socialist system,

The advent of the colonizers gradually changed the socialist economic system that prevailed in traditional Lesotho society. First, they imposed an unknown tax scheme that was aimed at rewarding the new foreign authorities. The market for labour power intensified as men were given the additional responsibility of maintaining the lives of their new masters who were imbued with expensive tastes. The selling of labour power became a common thing and was embraced because it amounted to earning money which was called ‘wages’.

Second, colonizers introduced Western capitalism. Markets were opened, commodities such as food, clothes and the like, which were largely shared and exchanged on a larger scale began to be sold and bought on a large scale. Large-scale holdings of private capital spread rapidly. General socialization of goods soon became a thing of the past. In pre-colonial era people cultivated collectively large fields owned by local chiefs. At harvest time, food was stored at the chiefs’ place and accordingly allocated to the badly off and strangers.

The current economic system prevailing in Lesotho today is capitalism. In comparison with pre-colonial socialist system, it can be proven empirically that the economic situation of the Basotho is far worst off under the current system. As can be expected, only the few extremely rich capitalists enjoy the benefits of natural resources while the masses live in utter poverty that results in shameful deaths caused by starvation.

Market socialism, a system that is beneficial to all, can remedy the existing unwanted economic situation in Lesotho. About market socialism, Schweikart has this to say:

A market socialist economy eliminates or greatly restricts private ownership of the means of production, substituting for private ownership some form of state or worker ownership. It retains the market as the mechanism for coordinating most of the economy, although there are usually restrictions placed on the market in excess of what is typical under

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capitalism... the system is a 'worker-self-managed' market socialism (Ollman, 1998: 10).

Some elements entailed in market socialism never featured in pre-colonial Lesotho society. For instance, markets, money, and wage labour were outside the scope of Lesotho traditional socialist society. However, I believe incorporating such elements of market socialism can enrich and be compatible with socialism as it ought to be in Lesotho.

I do not advocate for a market socialist economy that abolishes completely private ownership of the means of production. On the contrary, I make a case for a market socialism that restricts the major means of production in private hands. It is precisely this restriction that renders a political theory to be socialist. This point refutes socialists' critics who incorrectly maintain that socialism advocates absolute abolition of private ownership.

Economic equality and political citizenship

Beiner is a socialist who is discontent with the inclusion of economic equality in the definition of socialism. In his version of socialism, Beiner maintains that "some arguments for socialism regard politics as the means and economic equality as the end. Here this perspective is reversed: economic equality is the means and greater exercise of political citizenship is the end" (Beiner, 1992: 153). Relegating economic equality to secondary position as a mere means to political citizenship, Beiner's position turns toward Rawls' apparent liberal egalitarian position. Elsewhere in my unpublished work I have argued against Rawls' difference principle and cited Nielsen's argument that as long as the difference principle allows extensive income differentials, the well off people will gain predominance of power and control in society. In this way, the difference principle is such that the wealthier people "will gain control over others or at least be in a position to exercise control or partial control, and in turn limit the autonomy of some and work to undermine their self-respect" (Pojman and Westmoreland, 1997: 207).

The justified disparities endow the well off people with inseparable wealth and power, and these in turn tend to undermine the liberty and self-respect of the worst off people. In a similar fashion, given that Beiner does not regard economic equality as an end, it is hard to see how citizens in his socialist society will exercise fully citizenship taking into consideration the fact that disparities in wealth have great impact in the exercise of political citizenship.

Daniels asks Rawls who overemphasizes the importance of liberty and undermines the importance of economic equality, "whether it is useful to talk about something as a 'liberty' when we can not effectively exercise it" (Daniels, 1975: 259). Similarly, I ask Beiner whether it is useful to talk about something as 'full-bodied political citizenship' when we can not effectively exercise it.

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Beiner maintains that “it is quite intelligible to assert the priority of politics over economics, which in this context means that as citizens we are prepared to subordinate questions of social and economic distribution to questions of political membership” (Beiner, 1992: 145). My argument against Beiner’s subordination of economics to politics is that this subordination allows and justifies disparities that undermine any effective application of the exercise of citizenship in the fullest way. In the real world of politics Beiner must admit that power and wealth are closely intertwined. Just as Rawls acknowledges that “inequalities in power tend to produce inequalities of liberty” (Rawls, 1971: 226), so Beiner’s subordination of economics to politics that tends to large economic inequalities also tends to produce inequalities of citizens’ participation in politics. Therefore, I include economic equality when defining socialism, and this is preferable to Beiner’s version of socialism. Undoubtedly, every person justifiably desires to possess wealth, so there is no reason why both economic equality and political citizenship should be regarded as ends. Given their interrelatedness, they must also be regarded as means to each other.

Traditional Basotho Society and Political Citizenship

Beiner’s idea of citizenship is something that was lived and practiced in traditional Basotho socialist society because economic equality was regarded as an end. Beiner ideally defines citizenship as an “active membership in a political community where the very fact of such membership empowers those included in it to contribute to the shaping of a shared collective destiny” (Beiner, 1992: 105). This idea of citizenship entitles people to actively participate in political affairs. Policy making and the like are not confined to a small fractions of persons making decisions for the whole.

In traditional Basotho socialist society active participation in political affairs was neither a choice nor a monopoly entrusted to the chosen few. All male adults were duty-bound to actively participate in the decision-making of their respective villages, as it was the case in Aristotle’s polis. (Unfortunately, being a patriarchal society, the exclusion of women in politics in traditional Basotho society was not questioned, as was the case in many Western traditional societies). It was illegal for a man to refrain from participating in decision-making without proper reasons.

In his Lesotho 1970, Khaketla clearly explains and clarifies that beginning with the first paramount chief of the Basotho, succeeding paramount chiefs never used power despotically. About Moshoeshoe I, Khaketla thus maintains:

Anyone who has studied the life of Moshoeshoe I will conclude that he was a true democrat. Any matter for decision of national moment was always submitted to a pitso (public meeting) of the whole nation or to a Council of Advisors. After views had been aired, he was sent a report of the proceedings, which embodied the feelings of the people or the Council. The advisers then tendered their advice with the King was free to accept or reject.

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But as he was a wise man, there is no known case when MoshoeshoeI ever acted contrary to the advice of his people or his Council” (Khaketla, 1971: 109).

The chief and his councilors were not policy-makers but executioners of the decisions made collectively. Such decisions were made by the people in a “pitso”, usually but inaccurately translated a ‘convocation’ or an ‘assembly’. As opposed to a convocation, a rally or an assembly, a “pitso” is different in that in a pitso people are expected to participate actively in deliberating very important issues at stake. It is called for the deliberation on the adoption of important measures. Casalis confirms that “Causes are always discussed in public, and all present are allowed to take an active part, either to satisfy their curiosity on any point which interests them, or to aid in throwing further light on the matter” (Casalis, 1861: 230). Men express their personal opinions freely in these gatherings. The nature of these gatherings is deliberative. As Casalis observes, “The chiefs generally speak when all the others have finished; they commence with an exordium, setting forth the legitimacy of their claims to authority” (Casalis, 1861: 235). The chief simply concluded by summarizing the decisions arrived at; and the people loudly applauded the chief declaring that ‘le lumme’, that is, we accept, if the chiefs summary corresponded to what they deliberated and agreed upon. If they grumble while the chief is uttering a summary, the ‘pitso’ had to be postponed in order to review the issue at stake.

CONCLUSION

I conclude this paper showing that Gyekye makes a sweeping generalization about his moderate communitarianism. He explains the political situation of his Akan society in pre-colonial era; and instead of maintaining that the political theory that existed in Ghana was moderate communitarianism, he concludes that it prevailed in Africa as a whole.

In fact, this unfortunate generalization about Africa is common among some African philosophers. For example, Shutte writes thus: “my own recent experience of Africa... my own recent awakening to African thought, African values and African culture...” (Shutte, 1993: 8). But, when one reads Shutte’s *Philosophy for Africa*, one discovers that the recent experience, recent awakening of thought, values and culture he refers to are confined entirely to South Africa. As to why Shutte sets out to identify South Africa with the rest of Africa, is a question that is hard to answer.

About African political leaders who combated colonialism, Kaphagawani makes the following apt observation, Certain claims, commonplace in the parlance of some African leaders, such as that their governments are neither capitalist nor socialist nor communist, but are African, are no doubt testimony to the existence of this conception of African political philosophy, an amorphous political philosophy believed to

be uniquely African and with a unique political theory. As to what these writers mean by “African” is still not quite clear (Kaphagawani, 1998: 96).

In his *Ujamaa: Essays on Socialism*, Nyerere refers to the brand of socialism prevailing in Tanzania as African socialism. As to why he calls his socialism “African” is not quite clear. With clarity and precision, Nyerere explains the political and economic situation in Tanzania prior to colonialism, and instead of concluding that the political system that prevailed in his own country was socialism, he concludes that it existed in Africa as a whole. Just as Shutte mistakenly sets out to identify South Africa with rest of Africa and Nyerere too mistakenly identifies his respective political system in Tanzania with Africa, so Gyekye too errs by regarding his traditional Ghanaian communitarian society (if it was communitarian) as representing what was happening in Africa as a whole prior to colonialism. In order to be in a position to make the claim that all traditional African societies were communitarian, Gyekye should have undertaken a thorough empirical research. I have proved him wrong by showing that the political theory that existed in pre-colonial Lesotho was socialist as opposed to communitarianism implied in his sweeping generalization.

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