

**BERNARD MATOLINO'S OUTLINE OF THE BASIS FOR A
NEW AFRO-COMMUNITARIAN DEMOCRACY**DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ajct.v2i2.6>**Submission: December 5, 2022 Accepted: December 19, 2022**

Joyline GWARA

Department of Philosophy Religion and Ethics

University of Zimbabwe, Harare, Zimbabwe

&

Conversational School of Philosophy

Calabar, Nigeria

Email: joyandjay71@gmail.comORCID No: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2245-1171>**Abstract**

In this paper, I engage with Bernard Matolino's proposal for a new Afro-communitarian democracy as presented in his works "An Outline of the basis of a new Afro-communitarian political theory", "Afro-Communitarian Democracy" and "Consensus as Democracy in Africa". In these works, Matolino proposes limited communitarianism, which he believes takes care of the challenges presented by majoritarian democracy, socialism, and consensus democracy. His main argument is that democracy is possible in Africa. But this democracy should not be understood as majoritarian, socialist or consensus since these other ideas have their foundation in Afro-communitarianism, which limits individual rights. Instead, democracy should be built on limited communitarianism, which does not diminish individual rights but provides an environment conducive to realizing individual privileges, potentials, and rights. I will go about my task by looking at how Matolino outlines the weaknesses of Afro-communitarianism and the democracy that it inspires. Secondly, I will look at his proposal for a new Afro-communitarian democracy, which he called *limited communitarianism*, by considering its strengths and weaknesses.

Keywords: Democracy, Afro-communitarianism, Limited Communitarianism, Bernard Matolino, Africa

Introduction

The question of democracy in Africa takes centre stage in African political philosophy. Africa has been accused of failing to democratize. In order to defend Africans from this charge, African political theorists have argued for majoritarian democracy, socialism and consensus democracy as viable in Africa. These three ideas are anchored on Afro-communitarianism, which prioritizes communal interests over those of the individual. In this paper, I look at how Matolino challenges Afro-communitarianism and the democracies that follow from it. Firstly, he sets out to defend his limited communitarianism as thoroughgoing. I then look at his demonstration of the weaknesses of these theories of democracy, which prompted him to see the need for a new kind of Afro-communitarianism. I, then, consider the reasons he gives in support of his limited communitarianism. In the final analysis, I consider the weaknesses and strengths of his limited communitarianism, highlighting that the strengths outweigh the weaknesses.

Matolino's limited communitarian democracy

In the paper, “An Outline of the basis of a new Afro-communitarian political theory”, presented at a round table organized by the Conversational Society of Philosophy, Bernard Matolino is motivated by the need to defend the basis for his theory of democracy. Central to the accusations leveled against his theory is that he needs to stop making communitarian thought the basis of his political thinking because his communitarianism is not as thoroughgoing as he claims it to be (MATOLINO 2022, in this volume). As he sets out his defense, Matolino claims that this accusation springs from the “dichotomization of individual entitlements and the communitarian claims about the constitution of the individual” (MATOLINO 2022, in this volume). He notes that the problem lies with the definition of a person. One view defines a person as “entities possessing inalienable attributes that constitute their being, and the other view sees persons as entities constituted by their surrounding environs” (MATOLINO 2022, in this volume). According to Matolino, these two views are irreconcilable, and their implication extends to other spheres of life, and political philosophy is not spared. Matolino further notes that this could be the reason Africa has not warmed up to liberal democracy (MATOLINO 2022, in this volume). He then argues that this

dichotomization is not necessary. However, he is not advocating for a bridge between the two but is urging theorists not to pay blind adherence to either view (MATOLINO 2022, in this volume). Ultimately, Matolino believes that there are various models of communitarianism – and his work qualifies as communitarianism since it takes the facts of the community seriously (MATOLINO 2022, in this volume).

Matolino has noted the notion of the individual to be troublesome in African political thought. He argues that whatever version of communitarianism we can think of is faced with the challenge of how the individual is conceived. Thus, all communitarians cannot escape the fact that there exist individuals who are distinct from the existence of the community. Attempts to deal with this issue brought controversies in African philosophy, these issues having their roots in the works of Ifeanyi Menkiti and Kwame Gyekye. Many communitarian scholars have glorified and devoted themselves to the work of either Menkiti or Gyekye (MATOLINO 2022, in this volume). However, Matolino notes with concern how these scholars have failed to move beyond the works of these two great thinkers to consider the new insights from thinkers such as Dismas Masolo. He argues that these communitarian scholars have failed to factor in the fact that Africa has been affected by liberal or individualistic values through colonization. In view of this, Matolino believes that there is a need for a serious theorization of changed African communities. He laments the failure of these scholars to draw their attention to the works of Masolo, who argues that the African community in which the individual exists and draws her identity has been a changing entity. Thus, Matolino notes that Masolo's view will not take us back to traditional communities. However, what is key in his view is its new way of understanding the multiplicity of communities and individual experiences (MATOLINO 2022, in this volume). In line with Masolo, Matolino argues that African communities have significantly changed. From this realization, he develops his argument based on the view that African communities have changed over time.

He picks two ways of thinking about the community in the African context. Matolino notes that, on the one hand, the community is seen as a metaphysical category and, on the other hand, as the source of political thought and reality. For him, there is a difference between

the two, though most literature in political thought does not take it seriously. The failure of theorists to recognize this distinction has, for Matolino, confused how personhood is handled and how political theory unfolds in discussions of personhood. For him, it is the communitarian way of understanding personhood that has had a negative effect on political theory. Thus, politics has been conceived in ways that are in tandem with communitarianism. For Matolino, the fixation of politics on communitarianism is a way of preserving and aligning political thought with authentic African pedigree. This alignment fails to take into cognizance the changes brought about by colonization. The weakness of this alignment, as noted by Matolino, is that, firstly, it “forces African political theorization to be conservative.” Secondly, it views any theorization “not in line with communitarianism as either foreign-inspired or false” (MATOLINO 2022, in this volume). Consequently, for Matolino, African political thought and practice remain stagnant. Matolino laments the obsession of African theorists with the old communitarian debate, failing in the process to accommodate the possibility of re-thinking communitarianism. He cites himself and Masolo as examples of those who have tried in vain to influence the communitarian debate toward accommodating the current state of affairs in changed African communities.

He further argues that old models of communitarian thought will not suffice for this modern world. This is, however, not to say that old thought is no longer relevant, but it serves to inform us about our past as well as to inspire present and future theorization. He notes that communitarians are concerned about humanizing persons by the value they place on persons as entities that deserve recognition in a web of relations and associations. Hence, the individual must integrate successfully and fully participate in community life. This community life includes the provision by the community of all that is valuable to humans including social and moral goods. In return for these benefits, the individual is expected to ensure that she conducts herself in ways that promote the good of the community. Matolino highlights that, this is an idealistic arrangement or a far-placed desire for what an exemplary community should be. This kind of arrangement is evidenced in traditional communitarian societies.

Matolino further notes how thinkers have theorized about what brought about the undesirable state of affairs in Africa in the

economic, social, and political spheres over time. He notes two contrasting views that purport to explain how African states have come to be in the position that there are today: internalism and externalism. The former puts the blame on bad governance by African leaders who fail to respect democracy, whereas the latter lays the blame on external factors that are mostly related to colonialism. Matolino argues that we should embrace both views to bring about a holistic interpretation of the status quo in African states. Walter Rodney supports this view when he argues thus:

The question as to who and what is responsible for African underdevelopment can be answered at two levels. Firstly, the answer is that the operation of the imperialist system bears major responsibility for African economic retardation by draining African wealth and by making it impossible to develop more rapidly the resources of the continent. Secondly, one has to deal with those who manipulate the system and those who are either agents or unwitting accomplices of the said system. (RODNEY 1972, 33-34)

For Matolino, it is not the case that democracy is impossible in Africa. Democracy is workable in Africa, but that democracy is not a democracy that is libertarian, neither is it a democracy that can be drawn from African traditional communitarianism. Elsewhere, he notes the criticisms leveled against majoritarian democracy, which is that it has generally failed to register a positive effect on the African continent, has led to political disaffection of the losers and has caused enduring divisions between and amongst different political parties. Finally:

[M]ajoritarianism has been accused of being an inferior form of democracy when compared to democracy by consensus. The latter, its supporters argue, is not only directly traceable to Africa's past and traditions but tends to satisfy a maximal or more meaningful definition of democracy. (MATOLINO 2018, xi)

Even though champions of consensus democracy believe it to be better than majoritarian democracy, Matolino highlights its

weaknesses. He argues that consensus democracy is theoretically unsuitable for the multi-ethnic African nation-state and also that it is not different from the one party-polity or system. Over and above all, consensus democracy fails to satisfy the crucial requirements of democracy, such as the promotion of human dignity, individual freedom, equality etc.

Further, Matolino notes the problem that radical communitarian democracy presents: it imprisons the person and limits individual rights. This is because individual rights are not given priority but are regarded as secondary. This is evidenced by Menkiti, who argues that, within the context of African thought, duties to the community take precedence over individual rights (MENKITI 1984, 171-181). In support of Menkiti's point, Gyekye argues that, in communitarian political morality, priority will not be given to rights if doing so will stand in the way of attaining communal goals (GYEKYE 1992, 101-122). Traditional communitarianism elevates the status of the community over that of the individual, making it impossible for the individual to actualize or realize his or her inherent potential. Hence, in such societies, individuals cannot enjoy democracy because individual rights are sacrificed in favor of communal values if the two clash. After realizing the weaknesses of majoritarian democracy, Matolino also goes to show the weaknesses that both socialism and consensus democracy have. According to him, these two are also viable for Africa since they are not rooted in the experiences of modern Africans and are not concerned with satisfying ordinary African aspirations (MATOLINO 2022, in this volume). This is supported by Kwasi Wiredu, who asserts that human rights violations cannot be:

[R]ationalized by appeal to any authentic aspect of African traditional politics.... How to devise a system of politics that, while being responsive to the developments of the modern world, will reflect the best traditional thinking about human rights (and other values) is one of the most profound challenges facing Africa. (WIREDU 1990, 243-260)

Since Western values have externally influenced African communities through colonialism, Matolino argues for a style of democracy that is homegrown, which suits the changed communities. Thus, he argues for the kind of communitarian that does not limit

individual rights but provides an enabling environment for the individual to realize his or her full privileges, potentials and rights. He calls this brand “limited communitarianism” (MATOLINO 2022, in this volume).

According to him, limited communitarianism does not diminish the place of the community, but elevates the individual to the level of the community to be at par. By arguing this way, he attempts to silence his critics who argue that his limited communitarianism must not be grounded in Afro-communitarianism. However, one can still ask whether the individual can exist without the community. Matolino addressed this issue by arguing that the individual exists and actualizes her potential in the community. If this is the case, then one might be tempted to argue that, ontologically, the community comes before the individual and functionally, the community is above the individual. Thus, following this line of argument, the individual cannot be at par with the community; instead, the community is functionally above the individual. The community comes before the individual because for there to be the individual, there has to be a community. Even Matolino is forced to acknowledge that the individual actualizes her rights in the community and not outside of it. Thus, functionally the community plays a significant role in the life of the individual – where individual rights are derived and defined. Matolino’s obvious reply to this criticism is that the individual creates the community alongside other individuals and so is ontologically and even functionally prior to the community. One can respond to this reply by simply stating that an individual is born into an already established community and not in a vacuum. Hence, the community comes prior to the individual.

Notwithstanding this drawback, Matolino’s limited communitarianism helps to promote human rights and individual freedom. This is supported by the fact that limited communitarianism serves “both communal and individual rights without either causing tension between the two, commonly suspected ‘dichotomies’” (MATOLINO 2019, xii). Furthermore, his limited communitarianism takes seriously issues of individual identity, proclivity, and limitations that the community places on the individual. Hence, it affords the individual her dignity, the right to make decisions, and self-determination. Given the place to be a significant player whose dignity is respected by the community, the individual becomes an influential

figure in the democratic polity. In addition, Matolino's limited communitarianism rescues individuals from economic dehumanization and restores humanization. Here, the individual talents, orientations, and aptitudes are recognized, appreciated, and meaningfully engaged in the community to fulfill themselves as human persons (MATOLINO 2019, 158).

Conclusion

From the above submissions, Matolino's aim in the paper "An Outline of the basis of a new Afro-communitarian political theory" is to defend himself from the charges levelled against him by his critiques. After clearing the ground by arguing that his communitarianism was thoroughgoing, he goes on to show how it is difficult to go for a democracy that is supported by the structures of traditional communitarianism. Based on his analysis, neither majoritarianism, socialism, nor consensus democracy are suitable for Africa. The reason behind their failure to apply to contemporary Africa is that through colonization Africa has been exposed to individualism as well as the fact that communities have evolved. He proposed a new Afro-communitarian, which he termed 'limited communitarianism'. I traced how he argued for his limited communitarianism and the kind of democracy that is shaped by it. It also looked at some of the challenges Matolino's new Afro-communitarian democracy presents and its strength. In my final analysis, I argued that the weaknesses that Matolino's limited communitarianism presents are outweighed by the strength of the theory.

Relevant Literature

1. GYEKYE, K. "Person and Community in African Thought," [Person and Community: Ghanaian Philosophical Studies, Kwasi WIREDU & Kwame GYEKYE Eds.], pp101-122, 1992. Council for Research in Values and Philosophy: Washington DC.
2. MATOLINO, B. [Consensus as Democracy in Africa], 2018. African Humanities Program: Grahamstown.
3. _____. [Afro-Communitarian Democracy], 2019. Lexington Books: Maryland.

4. _____. “An Outline of the basis for a new Afro-communitarian political theory of Democracy,” [A Paper Presented at the Conversational Society of Philosophy Roundtable Event], 2022.
5. MENKITI, I. “Person and Community in African Traditional Thought,” [African Philosophy: An Introduction, Richard WRIGHT Ed.], pp171-181, 1984. University Press America: Washington D.C.
6. RODNEY, W. [How Europe Underdeveloped Africa], 1972. TPH Press: Dar-es-Salaam. Paperback.
7. WIREDU, K. “An Akan Perspective on Human Rights,” [Human Rights in Africa: Cross Cultural Perspectives, A AN-NA’IM & F. DENG Eds.], pp243-260, 1990. Brookings Institution: Washington, DC