

## A REVIEW OF BERNARD MATOLINO'S AFRO-COMMUNITARIAN DEMOCRACY

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Bernard Matolino's [Afro-communitarian Democracy] aims to discuss how communitarianism continues to influence African political theorisation. The book discusses how African political experiences have informed the formulation of two political theories rooted in African communitarian ethos, and the need to transcend these theories of politics. The book begins by identifying the challenge facing African people as primarily that of material deprivation rooted in the poverty that exists in the political sphere, and the lack of attempt at theorising useful policies for the African condition. It concludes by attempting to develop a political theory suited to the continent by providing African democratic systems that are grounded in local conditions.

Matolino's [Afro-communitarian Democracy] is structured into an introduction and five chapters that offer some insights into the role of political theory in African political experience and development. The book starts by exposing the failure of existing theorised political systems — socialism and consensus — and points out their theoretical and practical difficulties. Chapter One focuses on socialism, while Chapter Two centres on the idea of consensus. Concentrating on the socialism of Julius Nyerere and its foundation in the traditional conception of society organised along family lines, Matolino notes the misrepresentation of community and communitarian ethos and the exaggeration of communal harmony in traditional society as what informs Nyerere's form of socialism as family identity, which, among other things, abhors private ownership. The institutions and programs of the socialist interlude in post-independence Africa do not reflect human nature and do not capture the essential aspirations of the African people. The failure of socialist theories, Matolino notes, is not a reflection of the failure of African communitarianism but the weakness of character or philosophical standing of the socialist leader's sponsored program (MATOLINO 2019).

Consensus, as a suggested alternative to majoritarianism, is, according to Matolino, flawed by account of the communitarian ethos that underpins it and by the interpretation of the community on which it is theoretically founded. In his earlier work, Matolino offered an insightful evaluation of consensus, focusing primarily on Kwasi Wiredu's criticisms (MATOLINO 2018a). Drawing from Gyekye's critical description of Menkiti's version of communitarianism as radical and flawed, Matolino points out that Wiredu's consensus is faulty because its communitarian commitment is of the radical sort. Wiredu, admitting that there are differences in the manner in which individuals perceive and pursue their interests, argues that people's differences are a matter of differing perceptions and misperceptions of the nature of their interests, which, upon deeper reflection, they would discover are the same or similar (MATOLINO 2019, 46). Consensus (as a socio-political system that is entirely united in its approach and lacks the need to pursue differences through political parties) formally relies on an interpretation of community and communitarianism that implies the triumph of community interests over individual interests. In Matolino's assessment, Wiredu's

description of consensual democracy implies a polity susceptible to the intolerance of dissent (MATOLINO 2019). Wiredu's argument has attracted critical responses from other African thinkers, such as Emmanuel Eze (1997). I note that exaggerating the functionality of community in a communitarian structure informs the necessary association of certain models with consensual democracy, such as the non-party polity. That a lack of political parties exists in traditional communities that practice consensus does not indicate that consensual democracy, in its theoretical conceptualisation, is incompatible with party systems (ADEATE 2025).

Apart from the issue of prioritising community over other human and social considerations in African politics, Matolino notes the false description of community in African thought as part of his concerns. The lack of a true description of community is the inability to gather evidence to ascertain a fact or practice before developing ideologies around it. The process of gathering evidence requires careful consideration of contrary opinions. An intellectual effort is needed by internal and external observers of a people and society to search for truth while facing false claims and biases (MATOLINO 2019).

While developing a viable and practical account of communitarianism as a political theory is essential, the values on which it will be built need to be identified. Matolino dedicated the book's third chapter to searching for clues on what a non-essentialised African polity looks like. Here, he identified the value this communitarian polity has to be built upon as one that does not "accept the dominance of the community in shaping both the definition of personhood and the polity in which this person will naturally fit" (MATOLINO 2019, 88). Matolino believes that the question of what a person is<sup>1</sup> is not dependent on communal reality for its answer. As such, there is no need for communal reality to take primacy over individual interest. Matolino grounds his political communitarianism in humane values, which are common to all humanity, as opposed to a specific communitarian ethos; values that are not a preserve of this or that society (MATOLINO 2019). He further distinguished between mutual recognition and mutual identity to illustrate his point. While mutual recognition reflects a general value, mutual identity is of a traditional, communal sort. All human beings, Matolino notes, recognise the need for the value of mutual recognition and regard for others. "Regard and recognition for the other is what can be truly a communitarian value. It is communitarian in that it brings all people together in ways in which they can begin to build a genuine community of humanity" (MATOLINO 2019, 92).

In the fourth chapter, Matolino focuses on the need to develop an Afro-communitarian political theory that does not overly rely on descriptions of traditional societies or arrangements (MATOLINO 2019). That is, a version of communitarianism that is sensitive to the realities of modern-day Africa and that takes difference seriously. I have classified this move elsewhere as a commitment to modern Afro-communitarianism because the resulting communitarian theory is informed by the character and interests of modern society and not traditional societies (ADEATE, 2024). Relying on the communitarian value of regard and recognition, Matolino argues that creating a communitarian community that is receptive to difference is to make that community an adaptable living organism instead of a prescriptive edict that all individuals must abide by (MATOLINO 2019). Such a community must attend to individual expressions of agency, particularly the exercise of political freedom.

The notion of freedom is expressed widely in the book as an inalienable feature of humanity. Individual freedom is central to evaluating the communitarianism that was passed on (traditional) and the one we want to articulate for current (contemporary) political

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<sup>1</sup> A detailed analysis of the metaphysical aspect of personhood, which should be taken seriously in matters of the strict definition of the person, can be found in Matolino's 2014 book [Personhood in African Philosophy] and his 2018b article, "The Politics of Limited Communitarianism."

experience and life. Individual agency is an important characteristic of persons, which is responsible for creating the community that old communitarians argued should be prioritised over the individual. Matolino notes that his theory of communitarianism takes the issue of individuality so seriously that it seeks to protect the reality of the individual (MATOLINO 2019). He adds that his notion of community “does not see strict contradictoriness between individual realities and so-called communal realities. It takes a complementary approach toward both realities and recognises the high levels of interdependence between these two realities” (MATOLINO 2019, 133). On the relationship between the individual and the community, he argues that the appropriate relationship is one of absolute equality, in which both bear equal weight on each other and maintain independent standing (MATOLINO 2019).

The book concludes with the fifth chapter, which focuses on designing modern systems to address government incompetence and neglect of the public. Communitarianism, as a political theory in the modern context, entails a community that prioritises dignified treatment for every individual (MATOLINO 2019). According to Matolino, this sense of community is necessary to restore the basic humane functions of government and politics. Transcending the Kantian view of dignity as an inherent ability of individuals to be self-determining, Matolino points to recognition as the underlying basis of this dignity. Accordingly, he regards dignity as externally generated: the community, its institutions, and the individuals with whom the individual has contact must regard the individual as an entity worthy of recognition and consideration, and as an important part of the political makeup (MATOLINO 2019).

An important point to draw from Matolino’s Afro-communitarian notion of dignity is that it slightly echoes the old communitarian pattern of dignity and personhood and its reliance on the fact of recognition. The Bantu proverb *umuntu ngumuntu nga bantu*: a person depends on other persons to be a person (MARIS 2020), expresses the commonly accepted notion of personhood as a theory of human dignity and identity by the old communitarians. The implication of the word ‘depends’ for both the old communitarian account and Matolino’s idea of dignity is that it takes the “others”, or community members, to determine one’s dignity and personhood. The determination of dignity is not by the individual carrier of the identity and dignity, but through the individual’s dependence on community and its institutions to act responsibly and humanely toward her (ADEATE 2022). However, the observed difference between the two accounts of recognition is what the ‘other’ looks for in the individual. Also, in Matolino’s theory of dignity, persons are obligated to recognise the personhood of others because the inherent capability is somewhat of a universal property of humans, not communally approved properties of a particular kind. This approach to communitarianism is worthwhile since the outcome we seek is political. It is an approach that enhances socio-political inclusion and abhors inequality and discrimination.

I will note a few additional points to conclude. As a contribution to the Africa project and to the idea of communitarianism, the book canvasses for the reformulation and transformation of African communal values to serve as inspiration for how Africa pursues political stability and economic progress. The development of values, a strong commitment to a way of life, and the pursuit of harmonious relationships in traditional African societies give us a sense that we can always find an explanation for our ongoing reality and conditions in the existing values system. Because of the foundational importance Africans placed on values in building structures and systems, the development of values takes centre stage in African life. It permeates the reflections and lived experiences of African people. As such, analysis of values and value development have become key components of African socio-ethical and political theorisation in the modern period. Therefore, when considering values that will inform institutional and individual conduct, the first step is to avoid essentialism,

and the second is to engage in constant interrogation and critical reflection on existing values. African values and their defenders require a degree of openness to enable respectful engagement and to inspire the shaping of African social and political institutions.

This book is an excellent addition to the literature on African philosophy, and it expresses Matolino's commitment to reshaping discourses in African philosophy. It is also an earnest and ambitious contribution to influence the field of African Political Philosophy. It will interest scholars and anyone interested in political theory, African governance, and African thought.

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