



BOOK REVIEW

**THE LIMITATIONS OF BERNARD MATOLINO’S “LIMITED COMMUNITARIANISM”: CONTINUING THE CONVERSATIONS ON PERSONHOOD IN AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY**

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Bernard Matolino perceives some confusion arising from the diversity of opinion on the subject of “personhood” in African philosophy, hence his latest book of that title: [Personhood in African Philosophy], described on the blurb as “the first and only monograph wholly and exclusively dedicated to the concept of person in African philosophy”. The book, written in five chapters is indeed a comprehensive discussion of the concept as it has been grappled with by various philosophers on the continent in extant literature. It is worth pointing out that Matolino’s style in composing the book was typical of The Conversational School of Philosophy’s (The Calabar School of Philosophy’s) method of conversationalism. I wish to employ this method also in this review.

The first chapter examines two contesting proposals concerning how many orientations are there in African philosophy, that seek to address the concept of personhood. Whereas Matolino disagrees with Kaphagawani’s three theme thesis of force [associated with Placide Tempels], shadow [associated with Alexis Kagame] and communalism [associated with John Mbiti], he agrees with Ikuenobe that there are only two conceptions of personhood in African philosophy. In opposition to Kaphagawani, Matolino insists that Tempel’s force thesis is communitarian while Kagame’s shadow thesis is metaphysical. Thus there are two, and not three approaches to the concept of personhood in African thought.

In agreeing with Ikuenobe’s claim that there are two ways of talking about person’s, Matolino disagrees with Ikuenobe’s use of the word “descriptive” as an interchangeable category with metaphysics. Ikuenobe’s argument is stated as follows: “There are two plausible conceptions of personhood: metaphysical [descriptive] and normative. In the African view, the idea of a person has descriptive

and normative dimensions”. Matolino retorts: “while I am in agreement with the idea that there are two plausible ways of talking about the notion of personhood, I disagree with Ikuenobe on two issues of naming the first category as descriptive and his characterization of the second category as normative” (1-32). Ultimately, Matolino proceeds to argue that the two plausible ways of talking of persons are informed by the communitarian and the metaphysical perspective.

The second chapter of the book examines the communitarian perspective. The communitarian thesis is that African reality is construed by the reality of the community. It is this reality of the community that gives everything else any sense and right to existence. Matolino accepts that there are two contending versions of communitarianism and he adopts Gyekye’s terminology and distinction between “radical” and “moderate” communitarianism. Radical communitarianism is represented by Tempels, Mbiti and Menkiti, and Gyekye is the advocate of moderate communitarianism. Matolino’s argument against both radical and moderate communitarianism is that ultimately radical communitarianism does not command any significant philosophical difference from its moderate counterpart. Matolino’s position is that “while Gyekye is correct in showing that radical communitarianism is in error; his own version of moderate communitarianism is in error; his own version of moderate communitarianism does not succeed” (34-71).

Done with articulating the bases of the communitarian view and disputing the suggested difference between moderate and radical communitarianism, Matolino proceeds in the third chapter to present a view of personhood in African thinking that proceeds from a metaphysical outlook, limiting his discussion to a consideration of the Yoruba and the Akan cultural perspectives. Matolino’s purpose here is to show that the metaphysical view can be separated from the communitarian view and he proceeds to weave a metaphysics of personhood that is not unduly subservient to the communitarian scheme or framework. Matolino insists that “the subservience of the metaphysical to the communitarian is not necessary” (72-110).

The fourth chapter strikes at the underbelly of the communitarians. In arguing that Gyekye’s moderate communitarianism is not different from its radical counterpart, Matolino contends that the objections raised against the radicals also apply to the moderates, and that consequently, that is basis for the rejection of communitarianism. The conclusions of Matolino’s thesis in chapter four of the book are first, that “the whole project of communitarianism is not to be taken as a representative of all African experience”, and second, that, the communitarians commit a “category mistake”, and third, “that communitarianism as a source of the concept of person should be rejected as it stands in its current form” (111-159).

In the fifth and final chapter of the work Matolino proposes a new conception of personhood that he identifies as “limited Communitarianism”. For Matolino, limited communitarianism insists on the separateness of the personal identity and the communality of the African person. His grouse with both radical and moderate communitarianism is that they conflate these identities into an incoherent singular African view of man. Matolino believes that the confusion of

communitarianism derives from the ethnophilosophical origins of both the moderate and the radical views. In the final analysis, Matolino is confident that he has constructed “a new concept of person that is not beset with simplistic incoherencies, contradictions and category mistakes” (160-186).

Matolino in his Introduction of this highly persuasive and compelling book does affirm that philosophy by its very nature, “does not seek to foster consensus and oneness”, and though it neither seeks to foster chaos and disharmony, philosophy is an advocate of certain core principles that animate its discourses. The principles Matolino has in mind include:

a search for truth, following principles of non-contradictoriness, belief in reason, a willingness to adjust one’s position in the light of evidence to the contrary and a willingness to subject oneself as well as others to conversion through persuasion alone. (ix)

It is in that spirit that this review is undertaken, as I intend to continue the philosophical conversation. I believe that the outcome is likely to be stimulating. As Matolino himself observes in the book:

Like most, if not all, conversations among philosophers is likely to be exciting and it could shed light and clarity on certain matters. Yet it could also be very wrong and unhelpful or, even worse, incoherent and unsuccessful. Yet it is worth having for the better of these reasons. (2014, xiv)

On the whole, Matolino has very nearly employed the CSP’s method of conversational thinking in writing his book but for certain canonical breaches.

In employing the method of conversational thinking promoted by the Conversational School of Philosophy - The Calabar Circle (CSP) which highlights systematic exchange between a protestant (Nwa-nsa) and a contestant (Nwa-nju) geared toward opening new vistas, unveiling new concepts and building systems (see J. O. Chimakonam 2015a, 2015b; 2015c; 2015d), I shall here argue that Matolino’s “Limited Communitarianism” is a *tu quoque* against the communitarian theme because by Matolino’s formulation of “Limited Communitarianism”, the theory signifies a third variant of communitarianism, beyond the radical and moderate in which a tyranny of one still subsists. Matolino admits this much where he avers that:

Limited communitarianism is communitarian in that it realizes that for a person, issues of being a member of this or that community have an important role in satisfying her social, political and ethical identities. Such an identity, limited communitarianism argues, is important for the purpose of fulfilling the associative character that is brought by the capability that persons have to be both cultural and ethical subjects. This capability to be a cultural and ethical

subject is enabled by the key characteristics that are given to persons at creation, in African thinking, by God and that they inherit biologically. (2014,186)

In my view Matolino's Limited Communitarianism is not different from Gyekye's moderate communitarianism. Matolino is in error when he states that "moderate communitarianism fails to take individuality and rights seriously" (xv). Gyekye states clearly that "communalism as understood and practiced in the traditional African society does not, on my interpretation, absorb individuality but accommodate it and make it coexist with individuality (1996; 141). Gyekye posits that African cultures generally recognize that the natural, social human being also has individuality, personal will and an identity that must be exercised with rights that were recognized.

If Matolino's limited communitarianism is not different from its moderate counterpart, then I think that Matolino has not presented a new concept of person that is not beset with the same flaws that the other variants of communitarianism which he urges us to reject face.

Also, Matolino's presentation, it must be said, lacks comprehensiveness. For example, he did not address ubuntu conception of personhood, "a person is a person through other persons". I consider this a sterling omission. Even in his discussion of moderate communitarianism, he omits the forceful views of M. E. N Njaka and Pantaleon Iroegbu which are typically moderate even though they make a strong case for individual autonomy as Limited Communitarianism also did. One wonders if Matolino would still have drawn the same conclusion had he read these two sources.

Again, it seems Matolino did not take seriously the epistemic dimension of the subject of personhood. Engrossed in its metaphysics, he seems to have lost sight of its epistemology. It is not enough to construct a structure; that structure must also be knowable otherwise philosophers will go on holiday and reason will be vanquished. What is the essence of a theory of personhood in which personhood is accessible only to an individual person? This is what Matolino's theory looks like.

In my view, I do not think that Matolino succeeds to clearly separate the relationship between communitarianism and the metaphysics of personhood. His account leaves us to drown deeper into the ethnophilosophical well into which he has condemned the communitarian scheme. To salvage Matolino's metaphysics of personhood, I propose a new conception of personhood in African philosophy which is multi-dimensional and which I shall designate as "autonomy-in-community". This states that "a person is a person in the community". This can be contrasted with the statement of ubuntu that "a person is a person through other persons"; and that of the radical communitarians which can be stated thus, "a person is a person through the community". Here, my emphasis lies on the word "in"; that one is a person in the community may suggest the influence of community in constructing his personhood but by no means does this amount to that community consuming his autonomy and identity. Two factors are implied namely, sociability and animality (biological).

Biologically, every individual has separate identity and is born with autonomous will. These biological traits follow every individual and even though they are acquired in the process of one coming into the community, they are not extinguished by the community. However, every individual is also a sociable entity. This is probably another way of reading Aristotle's claim that "man is a political animal". Sociability then compels every individual to kowtow with the community. This does not however amount to the community consuming the individual as the radical communitarians tend to argue. I think this is where the misrepresentation of the radical communitarians was born. The moderate communitarians can also be linked to this community autocracy insofar as they concede that the community may trample on individual rights that conflict with the interest of the community.

Limited communitarianism claims to be different from the moderate version on the ground that it rejects the autocracy of the community. But this involves a tu quoque because Matolino's Limited Communitarianism merely reverses the trend; instead of the community preceding the individual, he suggests that it is the individual that precedes the community. He has not touched the kernel of discourse which is the existence of a tyrant or an autocrat that dictates in the relationship between the community and the individual. If the individual 'dictate' for the community and not the other way round, then Limited Communitarianism commits tu quoque. Matolino's over commitment to the metaphysics of inviolable individual rights lead him to this fallacy.

To remedy this, I articulate Autonomy-in-Community which (1) Recognizes the influence but not the tyranny of the community or the individual in shaping personhood; (2) biological features establish individual identity and confer autonomy on it, but sociability establishes the influence of the community in shaping the autonomy and personhood of a person hence, a person is a person in the community. Not only does Limited Communitarianism lack this type of precise statement, its conclusion leads to a scandalous position such as 'a person is a person in itself'. The main problem associated with this type of position is epistemic. How do we know that a person is a person? Even the Limited Communitarian would never be able to answer this question because he leaves no clue within his scheme. He discredited the community framework and appears to enthrone the person of the person as the only access to the person. At the very fairest, this can only mean that only an individual can access his personhood at which point the whole discourse on personhood in African thought becomes empty.

In my account the human person is considered as a complementary composite of diverse, multi-dimensional abstract and concrete interacting parts of which an immaterial spirit and a material body are the most outstanding elements. Most African cultures accept this conception of personhood as basic. The essential dimensions of the human person in an ascending order of hierarchical importance may then be identified namely as: animality (biological), sexuality, sociability, self-insufficiency, morality, religiousity, creativity, rationality and will power. These throw light as to the balance in the relationship between the community and the

individual. None precedes or dominates or dictates for the other. Both work complementarily, with the individual constituting the community and the community serving as a missing link in which the autonomy and identity of the individual manifest. Autonomy-in-Community therefore is a theory of balance and not a lopsided one. One major difference between it and other preceding variants including Matolino's Limited Communitarianism is that these other variants are lopsided. In fact, the only statement that is completely true about Limited Communitarianism is that it is limited (lopsided) as its name suggests.

By the animalistic dimension of the human person; it is understood that a person, though above an animal is fully an animal or biological entity and possesses all the attributes of an animal – he needs food, rest and shelter, just as animals do. He reproduces his kind, as the animals do. He is responsive to sense stimuli [especially to pain and pleasure] as the other animals. All these are so because the person, though a spirit, existentially lives and operates in and through a material body. In his bodily existence, the person, just as other animals, is subject to the biological laws of growth and reproduction, decay and physical disintegration. Whereas, the body of a person reflects a person's lower faculties, in the spirit of the person is embedded some higher faculties. It is through the substantial union of a person's higher faculties and the lower faculties that person, becomes an existent and dynamic reality.

Personhood carries a dimension of sexuality which is bi-polar, manifests as male and female. Sexuality is a positive dimension of the human personality, ordained by nature, for the balanced upbringing and socialization of human beings, and the perpetuation of human life on earth. The institutionalization of human sexuality in the form of marriage is geared towards the sound, harmonious and stable development of the human personality, in a manner worthy of human dignity and intrinsic worth. This is why in African culture marriage is looked upon as a sacred duty which every individual, every normal person must perform.

Traditional African societies have always acknowledged the social dimension of personhood. The evident testimony of human bodily faculties clearly and convincingly indicate that humans are created and defined to live and interact in a community of life with fellow human beings in a complementary relationship. All our natural senses link us up with other persons and objects. All our bodily faculties and senses – of speech, sight, touch, smell, hearing and movement – enable us to communicate, share and interact with others. So it is indubitable, the fact that persons are indeed destined and determined for mutual complementary link with each other, for group or social life.

Human experiences show that it is only through the processes of social interaction and socialization that the rich endowments and potentialities of the human personality can be developed, positively mobilized and fruitfully and beneficially challenged for the good of humanity. This is the justification of such natural institutions and agencies of socialization as the family, the community, the state, the religious society and other relevant social institutions. Undoubtedly, man is indeed

naturally destined to live in society or community, and finally take his exit from community or society as he had his entry through community. Personhood is unquestionably deeply rooted in an intricate social network. Sociability is thus a very essential dimension of personhood.

There is the self-insufficient dimension of the human personality. This may appear to be a negative dimension or a limitation. But human self insufficiency is inescapable. The human person is a being with natural and evident limitations in all his endowments, natural and supernatural. Metaphysically, a person is not the ultimate answer to, and explanation of, his existence. Even on the natural plane, abundant is the evidence of personal self insufficiency. Morally, physically, socially, spiritually, politically, the evidence is everywhere that humans are self-insufficient. The logical consequence of this human situation and predicament is the imperatives of personal and social interdependence and mutual complementarity of humanity.

As we go higher and deeper in the hierarchical structure of personhood, we come to discover that a person is fundamentally a moral spiritual being. Morality is an ethical term by which we designate the quality of human conduct in terms of its propriety or impropriety, fairness or unfairness, virtue or vice, praise worthiness or blame worthiness, goodness or badness, wrongness or rightness. That a person is a moral being therefore means that he is a being conscious of moral standards, of the ethical qualities of actions in terms of good or bad. A person is a being conscious and convinced of the fact that some courses of action are right and ought to be done, while others are wrong and ought to be avoided (or indifferent) and may be pursued or not. This is what is meant when it is said that “man is a being, a creature endowed with moral conscience”.

Many scholars, moralists and educationists have noted that the education of conscience must be the focus of moral education and character formation for both the young and adult. When all is said and done, the grandeur of human personhood is commensurate with his moral stature because morality and conscience are what places humans on a higher pedestal in the universe of creatures. This is why traditional African societies, like every human society really, possessed very clearly defined codes of morals.

Religiosity is another dimension of personhood. Religiosity here does not necessarily imply membership of any organized religion or confession of a religious dogma or creed, although these may have their appropriate and due place and importance in the society. Religiosity here means that every mature human person is confronted at one stage of life or another by those same fundamental issues of human existence which are the fundamental questions in religion and religious experience.

By fundamental issues of human existence, what is meant are issues and questions as: what is the fundamental origin of human life? What is the purpose and ultimate meaning of human life? What is the answer to the restlessness and apparent instability of the human spirit? What is the ultimate reality? Does God exist? How does God relate to the world of creatures, if he does? Is death the final end of man or

has human life positive eschatological dimensions beyond time and space? How is the question of good and evil and of natural catastrophes to be understood and resolved? And so on. All these are fundamental questions of human existence on this planet, which agitate the minds of persons in all cultures and generations. These questions naturally engage the mind of every human being, though the responses to them may be as different as there are many human beings and diverse cultures.

The consideration of these fundamental issues and the search for answers to them are the sources of the religiosity of humanity and religious institutions have emerged in human society for the satisfaction of the yearning of the human spirit. Undoubtedly the essential religiosity of the human person is self-evident in human experience and requires no debate or any further proof. Even the atheist or the man of science expresses religiosity. The religious propensity of the human personality is just natural and thus inescapable. In Africa, religion is a way of life. As Mbiti notes, "Africans are notoriously religious .... Religion permeates into all the departments of life so fully that it is not easy or possible always to isolate it" (1982, 1).

Creativity is another dynamic aspect of personhood. By creativity I mean the comprehensive capacity for originality and fluency and wealth of ideas, for requisite and spontaneous flexibility as situations may demand. Creativity further implies adaptive resilience, sensitivity to problems and deficiencies, as well as the capacity for change. To be a human person is to be the subject and focus of activities and to be able to manipulate ideas and objects for a designed purpose, all of which activities require a definite degree of creativity and resourcefulness. Every human person is a creative being. To be a person is to have capacity to originate rather than to imitate; and the development of human creative abilities is a veritable and constant goal in every sound educational system. The achievements of humanity in the Arts and the Sciences are an eloquent testimony to human creativity.

Rationality is yet another dimension of personhood. By rationality I mean the human ability to think, to reason, to understand situations and the logical link between a cause and its effect, the mental capacity to visualize a situation, to envisage a situation, to foresee the likely consequences of a given course of action, to draw the necessary conclusions and inferences from a line of argument or a statement, to deliberate over issues and situations. It is by the power of the intellect that all these human activities are carried out. It would be impossible to attain knowledge without this power of reason or intellect. Thus, the intellect as a faculty constitutes the moral and spiritual light of personhood. Reason serves the person morally as conscience; psychologically for knowledge and spiritually for meditation and contemplation. The development of personhood reaches its peak through the cultivation of the intellect, and the rational power, by the acquisition of various forms of knowledge.

In traditional African society, people who possess vast speculative knowledge were highly respected because of the impact they made on their environment. They were experts in their areas and were recognized because their

wisdom and ability to reason in a way that made a difference and in manners that gave striking insight into the nature of reality were outstanding. In most of traditional African society those who played this role were to be found within the ranks of those who occupied institutionalized authoritative offices like priests, priestesses, deity priests, diviners, rulers, elders, and outstanding members of some secret societies.

Lastly, *will power* is another critical and indispensable spiritual dimension of the human personality. The will is an aspect of the spiritual faculties of personhood. It is by this faculty that the person makes decisions, gives his consents, makes his free choice of action between various courses of action open to him, and freely determines himself and his stand. Put differently, the exercise of will power is the exercise of freewill. Thus free will is the spiritual seat of human liberty. N.S.S. Iwe has postulated that “intellect and freewill are the highest spiritual attributes of the human personality” [2000; 30]. The intellect and freewill are the psycho spiritual basis of human divinity and the foundation of human liberty and responsibility. They are furthermore the roots of his personal dignity and unique grandeur in the universe of creatures.

Iwe submits that intellect and freewill, are “the argument and justification for the immortality of the human person; for the spiritual and divine in man, logically, ought not to be subject to physical corruption and decay” (2000, 31).

This idea of immortality of personhood is a fundamental belief in African culture and African philosophy because in African understanding, death does not destroy the tissue of human possibilities and aspirations, because; for the African there is an innate sense of immortality. For the African, personal immortality takes the form of continued existence in the spiritual world beyond, and in reincarnation. The departure of what may be called “the soul” [known in various African cultures by various terminologies] from the body means the death of a person, but the departing soul [the very inner self of the individual] proceeds to acquire a “spiritualized body” in the spiritual realms; and in the case of a reincarnated “soul”, the “soul” has the potentiality of its being purified from the bodily ills which were a bane in a previous life. This is the transcendent, immaterial, abstract aspect of the conception of human personality and personhood in the African metaphysical tradition.

What my metaphysics of African personhood seeks to establish is that for the African, personhood is a complex, puzzling, even paradoxical being. On the one hand, the higher and sublime faculties of humans have aroused in many admiration, optimism and praise; and on the other hand, and simultaneously, the vicious propensities of humans have led to expressions of cynicism and pessimism, despondency and disgust with the human personality. It is for this reason of the enigmatic nature of human personhood and the possibilities and capacities of the human being that the human personality is considered awesome in African metaphysics of personhood.

The point made ultimately here is that in my conception of personhood in African philosophy, a person is a very complex structure whose operation can be

understood in terms of powers both material and immaterial. These interact with each other in ways that cannot be fully comprehensible, but can be best understood or interpreted in a mode of complementarity of discrete interacting elements – biological, social, religious, metaphysical, psychological, cultural etc. Personhood comes with identity and autonomy, but functioning as a missing link with other persons in a community in order to fulfill the social nature of the person and attempt to satisfy the inescapable self-insufficiency hence, my theory of personhood as “autonomy-in-community”.

This theory of personhood as autonomy-in-community in its comprehensiveness seeks to remedy the problems of hitherto theories, especially the limitations or the lopsidedness of Matolino’s limited communitarianism in that without the burden of ethnophilosophical baggage it reconciles the relationship between communitarianism and metaphysics in the conception of personhood in African philosophy. Matolino’s task of separating communitarianism and metaphysics in the African conception of personhood ultimately becomes an exercise in futility. Let us continue the conversation.

### Relevant Literature

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