

## Where Communitarianism Stops and Liberalism Begins

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**Abstract:** Bernard Matolino argues that Kwame Gyekye's moderate communitarianism is not different from the radical communitarianism of earlier communitarians. But I show that in many other places, Matolino acknowledges that Gyekye's version is indeed different. I also show that Matolino has the penchant to not only praise Gyekye for positions he (Matolino) has previously criticized, but also to take over such positions by making them central arguments in his own philosophical schemes. Lastly, I show that where Matolino seeks to avoid what he criticizes in Gyekye and other communitarians, the avoidance lands him in liberalism. Where his position coincides with those of earlier communitarians, Matolino lacks originality, and where his position differs, he falls out of communitarianism. The conclusion is that Matolino is unable to secure a distinct position as a communitarian.

**Keywords:** African philosophy, basic rights, communitarianism, liberalism

In its history, communitarianism has been an attempt to correct the excesses of liberalism, and recent streaks of liberalism in communitarian societies have been attempts to curtail the excesses of communitarianism. Both perspectives of society derive their balance from mutual checks in a symbiotic relationship. Instances of Western communitarianism have been reactions to the outbreak of liberal ideologies, and African communitarianism began as an attempt to check the cultural incursion of liberalism. The result is that the first wave of African communitarianism was radical; the second was reflectively moderate. Bernard Matolino's approach to this debate has been, first, to deny the second wave; second, to accept and laud it; and, third, to advocate a liberal perspective. In spite of his liberal advocacy, Matolino pleads not to be seen as a liberal. This, along with his inconsistent approach to moderate communitarianism, suggests that Matolino is struggling to determine what his position should be in the communitarian debate. This struggle results in an advocacy for the rights, freedoms, and autonomy of the

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individual. In my view, Matolino's concern about being seen as a liberal in a communitarian tradition is misplaced. I distinguish between 1) radical and moderate strands in the liberal tradition and 2) radical and moderate forms of communitarianism; 3) I use these distinctions to show that Matolino is a moderate liberal; and 4) I use the first distinction to argue that Matolino's liberalism is not a position he should be ashamed of.

I have divided the essay into five sections. The first section distinguishes between radical and moderate liberalism. I also outline a brief history of liberalism and how its radical version led to the emergence of radical communitarianism. The second section outlines the emergence of communitarianism and how the extremity of early radical communitarianism led to a moderate version of communitarianism. The third section explains Kwame Gyekye's moderate communitarianism and how it attempted to differ from the early African communitarian positions. The fourth section outlines Bernard Matolino's critique of moderate communitarianism. I show that although Matolino's central argument is that Gyekye does not differ from the early communitarians, Matolino nullifies this argument by praising Gyekye for differing from the early communitarians, and even adopting Gyekye's advocacy for individual freedom, autonomy, and creativity. Matolino is aware that his main objection to Gyekye is that Gyekye acknowledges the priority of the community over the individual, a position that Matolino claims puts Gyekye in the same position with early communitarians. But I argue that any communitarianism (including the moderate kind) would need such a position to be communitarian *at all*. The fifth section observes that in espousing his own communitarianism, Matolino avoids this position by avoiding any statement implying that the community could be more important than the individual. But such a position is liberalist.

### **Liberalism and Communitarianism**

One of the common fallacies committed by some communitarians is to treat liberalism like a single straightforward proposition that should be either accepted or rejected. I call this the fallacy of composition: rejecting a whole due to the defect of only some of its parts. This fallacy is in full display in Martin Odei Ajei.<sup>1</sup> Like I have argued elsewhere, Ajei commits a fallacy of composition when he sets up a simple dichotomy between liberalism and communitarianism and rejects the rich tradition of liberalism in its whole because of the demerits of its radical versions. Ajei cherry-picks only those versions of liberalism that are suitable for his one-sided assessment.

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Ajei, "Kwasi Wiredu's Consensual Democracy: Prospects for Practice in Africa," in *European Journal of Political Theory*, 15:4 (2016), 445–466.

To make this fallacy very plain, Ajei writes to reject “the basic civil and political rights,” the “uncontroversial and urgent human rights.”<sup>2</sup> It does not occur to Ajei that his own culture recognizes many of these rights including the right to life. Ajei is silent on liberals who advocate versions of liberalism that are in fact communitarian, such as John Rawls’ acknowledgment of deep moral pluralism and his advocacy of a shared public conception of justice (which was described by Gerald Doppelt as communitarian liberalism acknowledging the community’s role whilst maintaining liberal principles).<sup>3</sup> Ajei also ignores a whole batch of moderate or “communitarian” liberals who advocate the value and role of the community within the liberal dispensation, including Michael Sandel, Charles Taylor, Michael Walzer, Amartya Sen, and Martha Nussbaum. Matolino is also guilty of this fallacy when he advocates a liberal position yet expresses fear of being branded a liberal and argues that he should not be seen as one.<sup>4</sup>

Like liberalism, communitarianism also had its roots. It emerged to counteract the excesses of liberalism. The difference between community and communitarianism is that communities have always existed, but communitarianism (at least the political rather than the early Christian variant) is only a few centuries old, dating back to the German communitarianism of George Hegel, Ferdinand Tönnies, and other contemporaries. According to D. A. Masolo:

Deriving from Hegel, Western communitarianism maintains that the rights of individuals are not basic, and that the collective can have rights that are independent of, and even opposed to, what liberals claim are the rights of individuals. As is evident from this characterization, communitarianism in this sense directly or indirectly follows in the path of a philosophical romanticism by which the state found a new definition and a mystical meaning in the hands of

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 453.

<sup>3</sup> Gerald Doppelt, “Beyond Liberalism and Communitarianism: Towards a Critical Theory of Social Justice,” in *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 14 (1988), 281; John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 441, cited in Roberto Alejandro, “Rawls’ Communitarianism,” in *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 23:1 (1993), 78.

<sup>4</sup> Bernard Matolino, *Consensus as Democracy in Africa* (Grahamstown: NISC/AHP, 2018), 9, 90, 99, and 120; Bernard Matolino, *Afro-Communitarian Democracy* (London: Lexington, 2019), 18, 60–61, and 114–115.

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the nineteenth-century German historical school of which Hegel was part.<sup>5</sup>

Masolo narrates that the Germans were spurred toward communitarian thinking by their attempts to resist the invasion of the French emperor, who took advantage of a disunited Germany. The French invasion was not just military but cultural, and a cultural resistance was considered needful. In Masolo's words:

... a new mood developed among German writers and poets, turning their interests inward upon their own nation, their people, their race. For them the people, the Volk, was endowed not merely with a history, which obviously every people possesses, but also with a sort of mystical essence and value transcending both the merits of the nation's present members and the external facts of its past.<sup>6</sup>

Like the German example, Anglo-American and African versions of communitarianism emerged as reactions to "invasions" of different sorts (especially cultural invasions). Anglo-American communitarianism emerged to resist what it saw as the destabilizing effects of radical liberalism. In contrast to the emphasis on individual rights and autonomy in John Milton, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, John Stuart Mill, Immanuel Kant, Ronald Dworkin and others, an emphasis on community, its rights, and its primacy began to appear in Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor, Michael Sandel, Michael Walzer, and some others.

In Africa, communitarianism emerged in the minds of the founding fathers of many African states, as a re-statement of tradition against the neoliberalist incursions from Western culture. Early African communitarians emphasized the priority of the community over the individual and made few, if any, remarks about individual rights. A more moderate version of communitarianism followed in the work of Kwame Gyekye, who objected to the radical claims of earlier communitarians and balanced his account by recognizing the existence of individual rights and autonomy within his traditional society. There has been a debate on whether Gyekye's moderate version differs significantly from that of earlier communitarians. I think there is indeed a difference, based on my engagement in this essay with Matolino and, to a lesser extent, Famakinwa.

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<sup>5</sup> D. A. Masolo, "Western and African Communitarianism: A Comparison" in *A Companion to African Philosophy*, ed. by Kwasi Wiredu (Malden: Blackwell, 2004), 483.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

Let me, at this point, make a clarification that will frame my discussion of Matolino's contribution to the communitarianism debate. When a scholar emphasizes only community responsibility without emphasizing individual rights, such a person is a radical communitarian. Thus, I agree with Gyekye on the use of this terminology to describe the early African communitarians before him. When a scholar gives emphasis to both community responsibility and individual rights, such a person is a moderate communitarian or moderate liberal depending on the relative weighting they give to the two variables. If the scholar tilts the balance a lit bit in favour of individual rights whilst still recognizing community responsibility, that person is a moderate liberal. I will show that this is Matolino's position. If the scholar tilts the balance a bit in favour of community responsibility whilst still acknowledging individual rights, such a position is moderately communitarian. As I will show, it is clear that this is Gyekye's position. To be a communitarian is, at bottom, to accord some kind of priority to the community. One cannot be a communitarian if he or she gives equal weighting to community or individual rights or gives a bit more emphasis to individual rights. The term communitarianism itself implies some form of priority for the community, and all versions of communitarianism fall within the scope of according such priority. The distinction between radical and moderate communitarianism is with the different weighting of priority given to the community.

When we find in a scholar's writings *only* a defense of individual rights and freedom, such a scholar is a liberal (since this is the definition of liberalism). If the scholar tempers his advocacy for individual rights and freedoms with an awareness of those of other individuals, then such a position is moderate liberalism. I am going to show that Bernard Matolino's contribution to the communitarian debate falls into this last category, and the mere fact that his contribution is in fact to a debate on communitarianism does not entitle him to call his theory "communitarianism."

### **Problems with Early (or Classical) African Communitarianism**

Radical liberalism seemed too focused on the individual at the expense of the community. But in my view, its proponents were seeking to safeguard the individual against state power abuse. They were writing in the context of the transition from feudalism and aristocracy to capitalism and democracy, and the major theme of the time was how to tame the power of the sovereign. The advocacy for individual rights was in fact a bulwark against totalitarianism and the tendency of totalitarian leaders to justify their actions by invoking the collective wellbeing of the community. First, these interpretations of liberalism make it clear that rights are rights of individuals,

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which are claimed against the state and society as a whole.<sup>7</sup> Second is that we should hold these rights as so sacrosanct that we cannot subject them to bargaining or to the calculus of social (or community) interests.<sup>8</sup> These versions of liberalism hold the dignity of the individual in so much esteem that the individual is seen as “a small scale sovereign.”<sup>9</sup> The individual’s rights and dignity are so important that they can, if need be, “trump” wider social goals.<sup>10</sup> This school of scholars also argues that the autonomy of the individual bequeaths on her the right to choose her ends ‘not because such arrangement promotes overall human welfare, but because any arrangement that denied [the individual] that say would be a grave indignity.’<sup>11</sup> The readiness of this school to dispense with the community in preference for the individual could be seen when Mill argues that “if all of mankind minus one were of one opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person than he, if he had the power, would be in silencing mankind.”<sup>12</sup> This, in my view, is radical liberalism.

These scholars may have sought to protect the individual from the state. But in recent contexts they are interpreted as disregarding community cohesion and values. There is a lot of difference between a sovereign state and a cultural community, but it is not in the interest of the focus of this article for me to dwell on that analysis.

The crux of my foregoing gist is that some communitarians (including early African communitarians) responded to radical liberalism by taking positions at the other extreme end of the individual-community spectrum, positions so extreme that the individual was completely lost in community identity. The clearest example is John Mbiti’s account of how his people understand the relationship between the community and the individual. According to him, “whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole groups happens to the individual. The individual can only say, ‘I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am’.”<sup>13</sup> The first President of Kenya said on behalf of his people,

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<sup>7</sup> See E. R. Howard, “Group versus individual identity in the African debate on human rights,” in *Human Rights in Africa: Cross Cultural Perspectives*, ed. by An-Na’im AA and Deng MF (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 1990), 159; Ajei, “Kwasi Wiredu’s Consensual Democracy,” 454.

<sup>8</sup> See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 4.

<sup>9</sup> H. L. A. Hart, *Essays on Bentham: Studies in Jurisprudence and Political Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 183.

<sup>10</sup> Ronald Dworkin, “Rights as trumps,” in *Theories of Rights*, ed. by Jeremy Waldron (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 153.

<sup>11</sup> Warren Quinn, *Morality and Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 170.

<sup>12</sup> John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1987), 76.

<sup>13</sup> John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophies* (New York: Doubleday, 1970), 141.

according to Gikuyu ways of thinking, nobody is an isolated individual. Or rather, his uniqueness is a secondary fact about him; first and foremost, he is several people's relative and several people's contemporary ... The personal pronoun 'I' was used very rarely in public assemblies. The spirit of collectivism was much ingrained in the mind of the people.<sup>14</sup>

According to Kwame Gyekye, these communitarians give the impression that the individual is *wholly* constituted by social relationships.<sup>15</sup> This kind of communitarianism is generally silent on individual rights. The only mention of individual rights in this school of thought is by Ifeanyi Menkiti, who reluctantly accepted the reality of individual rights, but accorded them a secondary status. According to him, "in the African understanding, priority is given to the duties which individuals owe to the collectivity, and their rights, whatever these may be, are seen as secondary to their exercise of their duties."<sup>16</sup>

Gyekye has termed this kind of communitarianism *radical* communitarianism. I also find Matolino's use of the terminology "classical communitarianism" appropriate in describing these early communitarians of Africa. The terminology is fitting for both chronological and methodological reasons. Chronologically, it describes the works of the pioneer African communitarians. Methodologically, the early African ideas about communitarianism had a somewhat extreme perspective that later versions of communitarianism have sought to depart from.

### Moderate Communitarianism

Kwame Gyekye corrects what he sees as the extremity of classical communitarianism by demonstrating (with some African proverbs as evidence) that some degree of individual rights and autonomy existed in traditional African communities, and their existence does not support the version of communitarianism the classical communitarians are claiming. Referring to the classical communitarians, Gyekye writes, "in as much as all of the scholars referred to do not appear to fully recognize the status and relevance of individual rights, their views patently model the notion of

<sup>14</sup> Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya* (New York: Vintage Books, 1965), 297 and 188.

<sup>15</sup> Kwame Gyekye, *Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 37.

<sup>16</sup> Ifeanyi Menkiti, "Personhood and Community in African Traditional Thought," in *African Philosophy: An Introduction*, ed. by R. A. Wright (Lanham: University Press of America, 1984), 180.

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radical and unrestricted communitarianism. ... This notion of communitarianism I find hard to support.”<sup>17</sup> Gyekye accepts that a person is compulsorily born into a human community and thrust into social relationships (what Gyekye calls the individual’s natural sociality). This natural or compulsory feature of a society means that the community cannot be derivative of the individuals. And since it is the structure of the community that provides the “goals and life plans, and, through these activities” the individual becomes what she wants to be, Gyekye argues, “the cultural community must be held as prior to the individual.”<sup>18</sup> This position regarding the relationship between the individual and community, in my view, establishes Gyekye as a communitarian.

However, Gyekye says that his own communitarianism is not the same as those of the classical communitarians (whom he calls the radical communitarians). He starts by citing Senghor as arguing that African societies placed *more* emphasis on the group than on the individual.<sup>19</sup> Gyekye interprets this argument as moderate communitarianism because it does not ignore the status of the individual completely. Gyekye also cites some Akan proverbs showing the responsibilities of individuals for their own situations even within the community. Some of these proverbs include, “Life is as you make it yourself,” “It is by individual effort that we struggle for our heads,” and “Nobody cracks palm kernels with his (or her) teeth for another” and others.<sup>20</sup> Gyekye argues that these proverbs show that individuals are still responsible for their situation in life, despite being in communities, and that even a helper cannot completely take over the burden of an individual.

What is problematic about classical communitarianism is the impression they give that individual rights did not matter much. This is summarized by Menkiti’s argument that “rights, whatever these may be, are seen as secondary to their (individuals’) duties.”<sup>21</sup> The fact that Menkiti mentions individual rights only once in his essay and his dismissive qualification of individual rights in this single mention as “whatever these may be” show the posture that Menkiti (and other classical communitarians) have adopted regarding individual rights. It is this general impression that Gyekye is trying to correct in arguing that the Akan proverbs regarding individuality are “evidence that the espousal of communal values does not in any way involve the rejection of individualistic values.”<sup>22</sup> Gyekye points out

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<sup>17</sup> Gyekye, *Tradition and Modernity*, 38.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>19</sup> Leopold Senghor, *On African Socialism*, trans. by Mercer Cook (New York: Praeger, 1964), 93-94; cited in Gyekye, *Tradition and Modernity*, 40.

<sup>20</sup> Gyekye, *Tradition and Modernity*, 40.

<sup>21</sup> Menkiti, “Personhood and Community in African Traditional Thought,” 180.

<sup>22</sup> Gyekye, *Tradition and Modernity*, 41.

that no society is absolutely communitarian or absolutely individualistic, but only some degree toward one or the other, and argues that we should recognize claims of communality and individuality as having the “status of equal moral standing.”<sup>23</sup>

Before I turn to the rest of Kwame Gyekye’s account, it is worth noting that the view of the individual and society as having equal moral standing does not sit well with his earlier claim that the community is prior to the individual. The latter statement is more appropriate to communitarianism of any sort, including the moderate kind. Moderate communitarianism is still communitarianism (an argument for some kind of priority or the other of community responsibility over individual rights). What distinguishes moderate communitarianism is its argument that individual autonomy and rights matter a bit more than classical communitarianism asserts. But it is unnecessary for moderate communitarianism to advance the argument that the two are of equal moral standing, for this leads anyone to question what is communitarian at all about moderate communitarianism, and such an argument could lay claim to the titles “moderate communitarianism” and “moderate individualism” with equal measure.

J. O. Famakinwa argued that Gyekye’s moderate communitarianism is not different from radical communitarianism because Gyekye gave priority to the community over the individual<sup>24</sup> and gave priority to social over individual values, for instance, to love over justice. He denies that Gyekye’s theory is moderate communitarianism because, “though Gyekye recognizes the rights of the individual, he never considers them to be the primary social value.”<sup>25</sup> This argument is incorrect because moderate communitarianism is *still* communitarianism, and communitarianism of *any sort* is the giving of priority to the community over the individual. If Gyekye did not prioritize the community in any way, there would be no logical warrant to include “communitarianism” in describing Gyekye’s theory.

Gyekye stresses on what he calls the natural sociality of the person: the fact that community life is not optional.<sup>26</sup> But Gyekye argues that although the individual is by nature a social being, she is “other things as well” because the individual has rationality and is capable of choice.<sup>27</sup> In as much as these play roles in the formation and execution of the individual’s plans and goals, personhood cannot be fully defined and constituted by the communal

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>24</sup> J. O. Famakinwa, “How Moderate is Kwame Gyekye’s Moderate Communitarianism?” in *Thought and Practice*, 2: 2 (2010), 65-77.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>26</sup> Gyekye, *Tradition and Modernity*, 42.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

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structure.<sup>28</sup> Gyekye argues that failure to recognize this could lead to investing the community with “an all-engulfing moral authority to determine all the things about the life of the individual.”<sup>29</sup> Gyekye argues that authors such as Mbiti, Menkiti and other radical communitarians are guilty of this failure.

On the notion of personhood (which has implications for communitarianism), Gyekye agrees with Menkiti that personhood in traditional African conceptions is a moral concept: it has to be attained according to how an individual participates in community life in discharging her duties, but he disagrees with Menkiti that personhood is attained through certain rites of incorporation, his reason being that it is moral acts that confer personhood rather than mere ceremonial rites.<sup>30</sup> Gyekye also disagrees with Menkiti that personhood is attained by gaining age, and that there is such a thing as “full personhood.” Gyekye argues that elderly people are not necessarily moral since there are elderly people “known to be wicked, ungenerous, unsympathetic, whose lives, in short, generally do not reflect moral maturity or excellence.”<sup>31</sup>

Having said these, Gyekye notes that according to the conception of his people the Akan, an individual who is not seen as a person is someone who is known to be generally unethical, rather than someone who experiences occasional moral lapses. And even so, those considered not to be persons are not denied their rights or cease to become objects of moral concern.<sup>32</sup> Persons who live isolated lives are also considered not to be persons. More generally, to be a person is a moral statement, implying that we become persons by performing moral duties and participating in the community. To some extent, becoming economically self-sufficient also leads to people being called persons, but economic acquisition still needs moral acquisition to confer the title of person.<sup>33</sup>

Gyekye restates his thesis that persons are not wholly defined by the community because persons might evaluate community norms and find them wanting. This means that persons are able to distance themselves from the community to be able to evaluate it.<sup>34</sup> The community does not also wholly define persons because individuals have the capacity for self-assertion, and the freedom to choose their destiny. The fact that certain visionary leaders are described as “ahead of their times” also means that persons can climb over

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 47–48.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

cultural walls and that those walls “may not be as cloistering as it might be supposed.”<sup>35</sup> Gyekye reminds us, “... the European societies from which individuals emerged in the twilight of the medieval period and contributed the ideas that spearheaded the rise of Western modernity were communal societies,” as well as the Greek societies from which Socrates, Plato and others emerged.<sup>36</sup> Restating his communitarian position, Gyekye adds, “But even so, the innovative activities of such an individual are intended to extend and enrich, rather than entirely break with certain aspects of the community’s history.”<sup>37</sup>

According to Gyekye, moderate communitarianism recognizes a dual conception of the self: the self as an autonomous, assertive being, and the self as a communal being.<sup>38</sup> Thus moderate communitarianism is “not obsessed with rights” as it also upholds concern for the common good.<sup>39</sup> Gyekye also argues that one right is another’s duty, but in communitarian societies, we help others not always because they hold it as a right against us, but because of our moral responsiveness to their situations whether it is their right or not.<sup>40</sup> But as an autonomous, self-assertive being, the individual should also care for herself as much as she cares for others.<sup>41</sup>

### **Matolino’s Problem with Gyekye’s Moderate Communitarianism**

Matolino is not convinced that Gyekye successfully differentiates moderate communitarianism from radical communitarianism. Matolino’s main reason is that radical communitarians also recognized individual rights like Gyekye does. Matolino reminds us that Menkiti recognized rights, although granted them a secondary status. Matolino notes that Gyekye argues for the existence of rights, and Matolino argues that Gyekye contradicts himself when he writes that moderate communitarianism is not obsessed with rights.<sup>42</sup> Matolino asks what Gyekye is instead obsessed with, and concludes that Gyekye prizes harmony, peace, stability, and solidarity. This, for Matolino, puts Gyekye in the same position as radical (or classical) communitarianism.<sup>43</sup> A quite absurd assumption of Matolino is that Gyekye is required to be obsessed with something (as if obsession is as beneficial to

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>42</sup> Bernard Matolino, “Radicals versus Moderates: A Critique of Gyekye’s Moderate Communitarianism,” in *South African Journal of Philosophy*, 28:2 (2009), 168.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

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life as food and water), so if Gyekye is not obsessed with individual rights then he must be obsessed with community responsibility.

I think that Matolino misinterprets Gyekye. First, I do not think that obsession is a requirement in theorizing. Second, the fact that Gyekye emphasizes individual rights and also prizes social harmony and stability do not constitute a contradiction. This is because emphasizing individual rights does not exclude prizing social cohesion. If Matolino thinks exclusion is implied, he needs to demonstrate it.

Matolino's second attack is that Gyekye defends individual rights, but that the radical communitarians *could also* do the same.<sup>44</sup> The radical communitarians in fact did not do this. And it is absurd to see how a communitarian theory could be "radical" by defending human rights. Matolino then cites an argument of Gyekye's showing that Gyekye is truly a radical communitarian. According to the cited argument, Gyekye writes:

Individual rights, the exercise of which is meaningful only within the context of human society, must therefore be matched with social responsibilities. In the absence of the display of sensitivity to such responsibilities, the community will have to take the steps necessary to maintain its integrity and stability. The steps are likely to involve abridging individual rights, which, thus, will be regarded by the moderate communitarian as not absolute, though important.<sup>45</sup>

Matolino's point here is that Gyekye is a radical communitarian because Gyekye matches rights with responsibilities. This, for Matolino, puts Gyekye "at the par with Menkiti here because he has also effectively given rights a secondary importance as Menkiti does."<sup>46</sup> I do not think that Matolino's argument is correct because I am not convinced that matching rights with responsibilities makes one a radical communitarian. I think that talking about rights alone without responsibilities would not make Gyekye a communitarian *at all*. Not even mainstream liberal theories talk about rights alone, only the radical liberals do. So it is too far-fetched to argue that Gyekye needs to advocate for rights alone to be seen as advocating moderate communitarianism.

In fact, matching rights with responsibilities is not even sufficient to make one a communitarian. What makes one a communitarian is not just the matching of rights with responsibilities, but the elevating of the community

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<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>45</sup> Gyekye, *Tradition and Modernity*, 65.

<sup>46</sup> Matolino, "Radicals versus Moderates," 169.

responsibilities to a higher priority compared to rights. The word “communitarian” derives from the stem word “community” and means “tending toward community.” Any version of communitarianism would not only match rights with responsibilities but also elevate responsibilities above rights. Even Gyekye’s theory is *not properly communitarian* when he argues that person and community have equal moral status. The word “communitarianism” cannot describe such a position. What makes Gyekye a communitarian *at all* is when he argues that since it is the structure of the community that provides the goals and activities through which the individual becomes what she wants to be, the community “must be held as prior to the individual.”<sup>47</sup> The difference between moderate and radical communitarianism would therefore not be whether responsibilities are elevated above rights, but whether responsibilities were discussed and emphasized *alone* without discussing rights.

I think that Matolino implicitly acknowledges my clarification because he demonstrates elsewhere that he accepts that Gyekye’s moderate communitarianism differs from radical communitarianism. What Matolino strives to do is show that Gyekye’s moderate communitarianism is not different from that of radical communitarians. But Matolino contradicts himself elsewhere by reversing all his arguments and accepting Gyekye’s moderate communitarianism. He writes:

In African philosophy, I find the distinction made by Gyekye between radical and moderate communitarianism useful. It is useful for its ability to separate what we can consider to be an exaggerated version of communitarianism against a more sober and realistic version of communitarianism.<sup>48</sup>

It seems to me that by “exaggeration” Matolino refers to the sole emphasis on duty to the community by radical communitarians. Matolino again contradicts himself by arguing that Gyekye indeed differs from the radical communitarians. According to Matolino:

Kwame Gyekye’s identification of a particular conceptualization of community as radical has not only ended with such an identification. What followed this identification was a concerted effort to show its philosophical errors, and much energy was invested in

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<sup>47</sup> Gyekye, *Tradition and Modernity*, 40.

<sup>48</sup> Matolino, *Afro-communitarian Democracy*, 58.

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restating the proper tenets of traditional community. Gyekye's (1997) and Masolo's (2010) arguments state something that must surely be an obvious fact of human existence. Their argument that any social structure, no matter how communitarian it is, will have to reckon with issues of individuality and other factors associated with individuality is a little obvious, but had to be stated with force in the light of some false claims made on behalf of the African sense of community.<sup>49</sup>

Matolino agrees with Gyekye that there is something objectionable about radical communitarianism. He writes:

My evaluation leans toward the view that consensus has failed to capture a usable and philosophically defensible communitarian framework. In its attempts at valorizing community or pressing hard for the reality of the community over the individual, it advocates a version of communitarianism which is as objectionable as what Gyekye has termed radical communitarianism.<sup>50</sup>

Matolino acknowledges that Gyekye secured a space for the discussion of rights within a communitarian framework. According to Matolino:

Even though Gyekye fails to secure the place of rights in his communitarianism, and has been rightly criticized for that failure, at least he recognizes the inevitability of those rights. Those who build on this inevitability continue with the tradition of recognizing individuality within a communal scheme. Such recognition has serious political implications as it leads to a polity that openly defends the rights of the individual, even within a communal framework.<sup>51</sup>

This argument shows that Matolino does not believe that radical communitarians accommodated rights in their communitarian scheme. But elsewhere Matolino contradicts this when he writes that the treatment given

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<sup>49</sup> Matolino, *Afro-communitarian Democracy*, 30.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

by both radical and moderate communitarianism to individual rights are the same. According to him:

Gyekye is at the par with Menkiti here because he has also effectively given rights a secondary importance as Menkiti does. It must be remembered that Menkiti does not completely reject the importance of rights. He merely states that whatever the importance of human rights could be, it is secondary to the importance of the community. In all important respects the views match each other.<sup>52</sup>

In contrast to this argument, Matolino yet again acknowledges elsewhere the difference between radical and moderate communitarianism, as he writes, "In some cases the extreme view of community might not leave room for individual rights and in other cases some restricted view of community seeks to recognize and give due recognition to individual rights."<sup>53</sup>

Elsewhere, Matolino also exposes other aspects of Gyekye's distinction between moderate and radical communitarianism, which debunk Matolino's own claim that the two versions of communitarianism are the same. Matolino writes:

what should be accepted is the claim made by Gyekye that while the individual is a communally embedded entity, she is other things as well. The other things that he refers to are will, memory, rationality, and capacity for virtue. Gyekye admits that the community nurtures these entities but crucially he insists that the community does not make these entities. The crucial difference between his position and the radical view, especially as espoused by Menkiti, is precisely around this point.<sup>54</sup>

Criticizing radical communitarianism, Matolino writes, "The actual value that is at stake and has to be defended is one that is identified by Gyekye as that the community will obsess about its stability. In obsessing about its stability it would then not hesitate to do everything in its power to ensure that such stability is not tampered with."<sup>55</sup> Matolino also writes, "As

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<sup>52</sup> Matolino, "Radicals versus Moderates," 169.

<sup>53</sup> Matolino, *Afro-communitarian Democracy*, 20.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

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Gyekye argues, the reality of the community, as a constitutive element of the individual, is only partial.”<sup>56</sup> Summing up the relevance of Gyekye’s moderate communitarianism, Matolino writes, “All we need to do is to accept that his (Gyekye’s) critique deals a devastating blow to the sort of communitarianism that Menkiti and Wiredu espouse.”<sup>57</sup>

In his attempt to distinguish moderate from radical communitarianism, Gyekye argued that although the individual is a social being, she is other things as well. referring to these ‘other things’, Gyekye writes:

I have in mind such essential attributes of the person as rationality, having a moral sense and capacity for virtue and, hence, for evaluating and making moral judgments: all this means that the individual is capable of choice. If we do not choose to be social - because we are social by nature - neither do we choose to be intelligent or rational beings with a moral sense (or, capacity for virtue).<sup>58</sup>

Gyekye had argued that the position of radical communitarianism does not give adequate attention to individual creativity, inventiveness, imagination and idealistic proclivities.<sup>59</sup> Matolino rejects this claim and argues that nothing shows that radical communitarianism oppresses or rejects these individual qualities. According to Matolino, “I do not think that Gyekye’s argument succeeds. He merely assumes that what he terms unrestricted communitarianism will stifle individual talent and originality. He does not show what precise element in the radical communitarian scheme would be responsible for that.”<sup>60</sup> But elsewhere in distinguishing his own communitarianism from “old communitarianism” (which includes the moderate communitarianism of Gyekye), Matolino writes, “The communitarian value that will support political survival of any given community is one that prioritizes the possibility of the free-spirited nature of human creativity.”<sup>61</sup> Matolino actually accuses the old communitarianism of underplaying innovation and inventiveness when he writes, “Innovation and inventiveness are qualities that are not overtly promoted by the sub-Saharan pedigree as outlined by supporters of the old version of communitarianism. The history of the denial of the importance of individual inventiveness is to

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<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>58</sup> Gyekye, *Tradition and Modernity*, 53.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>60</sup> Matolino, “Radicals versus Moderates,” 168.

<sup>61</sup> Matolino, *Afro-communitarian Democracy*, 139.

be found from nationalists right down to modern defenders of the romanticized version of communitarianism.”<sup>62</sup> So what we see from Matolino is a tendency to criticize others for a position and, later, deny that they took that position and adopt the same position.

Matolino actually identifies creativity and innovation as the central point of his version of communitarianism. He writes:

The responsibility I have in mind has to do with how the individual sees herself as completely free but responsible in her creativity. It is from such free but responsible creativity that the community is made. The community that is made is one that is truly representative of free engagement between different agents which results in the given community. The benefit of this free engagement is the creation of a community that may just as well exhibit characteristics that are consistent with a spirit of free inquiry.<sup>63</sup>

For saying that the individual is “completely free but responsible in her creativity,” Matolino earns the qualification of a *moderate* liberal because he tampered his liberalism with a sense of responsibility to the community. Matolino then makes creativity, innovation, self-assertion and the individual’s capacity for choice as the pillar of his new supposed communitarianism. I will shortly attend to Matolino’s supposed communitarianism in the next section.

Matolino praises Gyekye for arguing that although the individual is a social being, she is ‘other things’ as well: she has rationality, memory, and the capacity for virtue. But this undermines Matolino’s general argument that Gyekye does not differ from radical communitarianism. Matolino in fact adopts this argument in his critique of communitarianism. He writes, “What makes communitarianism work in the way it does, politically, is that it tends to whittle the nonsocial features of the self to a negligible role. Once this is achieved it moves to make communal concerns the overarching principle of both individual and political identity.”<sup>64</sup>

Matolino goes further to build his communitarian theory by focusing on the non-social aspects of the individual. He writes:

Gyekye correctly points this out in his attempts to develop moderate communitarianism when he states

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<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 105–106.

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that while a person is a communitarian entity bound in, and influenced by her community, she is other things as well. What I sought to demonstrate in my earlier work was the importance of these other things.<sup>65</sup>

No communitarianism of any sort would focus on the non-social aspects of the individual. I will come back to this point, since it indicates individualism. My general conclusion from this section is that from the contradictions I have outlined, Matolino's approach to Gyekye's moderate communitarianism is not consistent.

### **Matolino's Proposed Communitarianism**

To avoid the pitfalls that Matolino attributes to Gyekye (emphasizing community as well as individual values), Matolino strives in his own version of communitarianism to emphasize *only* individualistic values. He makes references to community but avoids implicating himself as arguing that the community can have any priority over the individual. He starts his project by arguing:

A communalistic view is one that is normally articulated as a traditional way of life that was found in African communities before they were spoilt by foreign intervention. Its traditionalistic worldview is seen as a purely untainted and instructive of how Africans understood life and values that were associated with a communal way of life. From this communalistic understanding of the arrangement of traditional life, a communitarian theory may spring forth.<sup>66</sup>

But, continuing, Matolino seeks to divest his communitarianism of communal underpinnings, when he writes:

Such a communitarian theory would be one that emphasizes the values found in communal setups. A communitarian theory, however, does not always have to depend on antiquated realities of communal societies. A communitarian theory may be able to articulate and defend ethos that are not necessarily consistent with

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<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

ones found in actual traditional communalistic societies. The key difference between communalism and communitarianism is to be found in communalist theories or practices that are normally restricted to the local understanding of life. Never extending beyond the clan, family, or restricted sense of community as one based on kinship or the institution of kingship, communalist practices are of a sort that is true of traditional tight knit societies.<sup>67</sup>

According to Matolino, “The sort of communitarianism I have in mind is one that is specifically responsive to the situation and reality that Africa finds itself in.”<sup>68</sup>

Going into the content of his communitarianism, Matolino begins by specifying aspects of the old communitarianism that he rejects, such as the idea that human interests are completely collapsible,<sup>69</sup> a human value that is specific to a particular communitarian ethos.<sup>70</sup> In contrast, Matolino finds acceptable a value that is universal to humans as humans. Specifying this value, he writes, “... my position is that regard and recognition for the other is what can be truly a communitarian value.”<sup>71</sup> Matolino does not deny the relevance of traditional ideas, but argues that what we need are “systems that will be able to work for the betterment of humanity in the here and now.”<sup>72</sup> Situating his communitarianism in a modern African city, Matolino writes:

If we choose to take the path that communities must have an absolutely close identity or as close an identity as possible, then difference will be a hindrance to that goal. But if we see the notion of community as an ever-evolving possibility that is neither hostile to difference nor intolerant of innovation, then we will look for minimal ways that seek to effectively manage difference without either valorizing it or undermining it.<sup>73</sup>

Matolino also disagrees with the old communitarian debate of seeing the community and individual as opposed, and argues that they should be

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<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

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seen as complementary, and advocates (like Gyekye) the moral equality of the individual and the community.<sup>74</sup> According to the analysis I have already made, this is not communitarianism of any kind.

Matolino then argues that radical communitarianism “suppresses freedom.”<sup>75</sup> This sits in unhealthy tension with his argument that Gyekye accused radical communitarianism of not paying adequate attention to individual creativity, inventiveness, imagination and idealistic proclivities, for freedom is needed to exercise these qualities in any society-changing way. As a major part of his ‘communitarianism’, Matolino argues extensively for freedom.<sup>76</sup> Matolino is even harsher than Gyekye in accusing communitarianism of stifling individual freedom. He writes:

Communitarianism does not only give a choice, but it also gives specifications about the choice to be made, and it proceeds to impose heavy sanctions on those who do not choose as it prescribes. It denies them a standing as agents who are capable of anything including making that choice, it denies them an identity, and it eventually condemns them to the margins of existence by withholding statuses that otherwise are naturally applicable to other persons.<sup>77</sup>

In designating the structure of the kind of communitarianism he wishes for modern African societies, what Matolino ends up doing is advocate a system that enhances good governance. He writes:

I am not advocating the retrieval of some saintly state of Africa or some essentialized outline of what Africanity is. On the contrary, what I am going to suggest is an idea of how Africa can, through reliance on its own intellectual resources of analyzing its current structures and practices, get itself on a path of government and economic systems that really care for the people.<sup>78</sup>

Matolino then explains that the communitarian structure he has in mind is one that takes the dignity of individuals seriously.<sup>79</sup> He explains that

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<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 139–142.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

the dignity he refers to is one that emanates from the individual's capacity to be self-determining,<sup>80</sup> to fashion and create,<sup>81</sup> and to recognize the other.<sup>82</sup> Matolino's argument is that the realization that we are in a community makes mutual recognition important for creating human dignity. He writes, "The notion of dignity and its subsequent application will be what makes human societies to become human communities. It is in the recognition of the dignity of each that we secure a human community that appears to have become elusive in the current African polity and political practice."<sup>83</sup>

The common themes in Matolino's "communitarianism" are individual dignity, individual capacity for choice, individual capacity for creativity, and individual capacity to recognize other individuals. Concluding, Matolino has this to say of his version of communitarianism, "In concluding this section I wish to outline what the communitarianism I have in mind will seek to do as a political theory vis-à-vis the individual. The theory I have in mind is one that takes the issue of individuality so seriously that it seeks to protect the reality of the individual both as a matter of reality for that individual and reality for the community."<sup>84</sup> But in my view, what Matolino advocates is *liberalism*. This is because advocating individual freedom, dignity, capacity for choice establishes Matolino as a liberal. Arguing that dignity is enhanced when we recognize the dignity of others (a mutual recognition of dignities) tempers Matolino's liberalism a bit and establishes Matolino as a moderate liberal. But Matolino's theory is not communitarianism of any kind (moderate or radical) because he avoids any proposition that even remotely suggests that the community has some importance that could make it prior to the importance of individual rights.

I have already clarified that arguing for individual rights and attributes alone is individualism or liberalism. Arguing for individual rights as well as community responsibility can either be moderate liberalism or moderate communitarianism (depending on the relative weights given to the two variables). Advocating both individual rights and community responsibility and giving a little more weight to community responsibility is moderate communitarianism. Arguing for community responsibility alone is radical or extreme communitarianism. By refusing to concede any superior weight to community responsibility, Matolino finds himself in a liberalist position. As if aware of this, Matolino pleads in as many as seven places

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<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 165–167.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 167–169.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

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(across two books) not to be seen as a liberal.<sup>85</sup> In one of these places, he writes:

It is important to emphasize that the recognition of individual rights within a communal framework must not be seen as advocacy of liberalism. While talk of individual rights and all attempts to show their inviolability has come to be associated with the liberal tradition, that must not be interpreted as either an exclusive concern of liberalism or that those who engage in the defense of individual rights are necessarily sympathetic to the doctrine of liberalism.<sup>86</sup>

In another place Matolino writes:

I think the most serious challenge that can be posed to my position would be that there is something fundamentally un-communitarian about my proposal. The charge could be formulated along the lines that I have simply resorted to a liberal posture of presenting the individual as the ultimate arbiter of interpersonal relations, mores, and communal significance in individuals' status.<sup>87</sup>

However, given my distinction between radical and moderate liberalism and between radical and moderate communitarianism, Matolino has his failure to clarify liberalism to blame for being worried about being seen as a liberalist. The current attitude to radical liberalism is the reason why non-Western scholars such as Matolino consider it important to plead for the safety of their careers whilst insisting on a core principle they are convinced is philosophically unproblematic.

### Conclusion

I have attempted in this essay to distinguish between: (1) radical and moderate liberalism, (2) radical and moderate communitarianism, and (3) used the distinctions to show that Matolino is a moderate liberal.

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<sup>85</sup> Matolino, *Consensus as Democracy in Africa*, 9, 90, 99, and 120; Matolino, *Afro-Communitarian Democracy*, 18, 60–61, and 114–115.

<sup>86</sup> Matolino, *Afro-Communitarian Democracy*, 60–61.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 114–115.

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