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COMMUNALISM AS THE FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLE OF AFRICAN ETHICS

Callistus Agianpuye Ubleble
Department of Philosophy, University of Calabar, Nigeria
Email: carlsbego2010@gmail.com

Abstract
Background: Communalism, a foundational principle of African ethics, has historically shaped moral thought and behavior across African societies. Statement of the Problem: However, the increasing erosion of traditional communal values due to globalization, individualism, and socio-political changes has created a moral gap that threatens social cohesion and mutual solidarity. Methodology: Employing a qualitative research method, the study undertakes a critical analysis of existing literature, cultural practices, and the philosophical contributions of African scholars to explore the ethical significance of communalism. Findings: The research reveals that communalism is not merely a cultural practice but a robust moral framework that promotes respect, justice, interdependence, and collective well-being. Nevertheless, its practical application faces significant challenges in contemporary contexts characterized by socio-economic inequalities and political instability. Contribution to Knowledge: The study enriches African ethical discourse by reinforcing communalism as an enduring moral compass that can inform current debates on social ethics and policy-making. Recommendations: To revitalize communal ethics, this paper recommends a deliberate reorientation toward communal values in educational curricula and governance, alongside policies that encourage social cohesion, solidarity, and collective well-being. Conclusion: Reinforcing communal ethics offers a promising path toward fostering a more humane and inclusive society in Africa and beyond.

Keywords: Communalism, Globalization, Individualism, Respect, Moral and Interdependence.

Introduction
African ethics is deeply rooted in the fabric of communal life, where the individual's identity, moral worth, and purpose are inextricably tied to the wellbeing of the community. Unlike Western moral frameworks that often prioritize individual autonomy and rational choice, African ethical thought emphasizes interdependence, relationality, and mutual responsibility. At the heart of this ethical system lies Communalism a philosophical and cultural orientation

that views the community not as a collection of separate individuals but as an organic whole where each person's humanity is affirmed through relationships with others.

In traditional African societies, moral conduct is evaluated not solely by personal convictions or internal moral reasoning, but by how well one upholds communal values, contributes to collective wellbeing, and fulfills social obligations. The maxim "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am"—popularized by John Mbiti and echoed across African philosophical discourse captures the essence of this worldview. Communalism serves not only as a metaphysical and ontological framework for understanding personhood, but also as the cornerstone of African moral norms, regulating behaviors through shared customs, taboos, and rituals aimed at preserving harmony and solidarity.

This paper explores communalism as the foundation of African ethics, examining how the community shapes individual moral responsibility, how virtues such as kindness, respect, and justice are communally defined, and how African philosophers such as Kwame Gyekye, Ifeanyi Menkiti, and Benezet Bujo have interpreted and refined the communitarian ethos. It also investigates how communalism responds to contemporary ethical challenges in pluralistic societies. In doing so, this inquiry affirms that African ethics, while dynamic and adaptive, remains grounded in the enduring principle that moral life is a shared life an enterprise in which the good of the individual is inseparable from the good of the whole.

John Mbiti on African Communalism

Communalism is a social, ethical, and political philosophy that emphasizes the importance of the community over the individual. It is built on the belief that an individual's identity, well-being, and moral obligations are closely tied to their relationships with others, especially within the communal setting. The key features of communalism include:

i. **Shared Responsibility:** Community members support one another and work collectively for the common good.
ii. **Interdependence: I**ndividuals recognize that their lives are interconnected with the lives of others.
iii. **Solidarity and Cooperation:** Cooperation and mutual aid are prioritized over personal gain.
iv. **Moral Guidance:** Moral behavior is shaped by communal values and traditions that encourage respect, compassion, and harmony.

In many African societies, communalism is the basis of social life, ethics, and identity. It upholds the principle that a person is a person through other persons, reflecting the view that humanity is defined by one's relationships and contributions to the community. John Mbiti extended the discourse on African communalism initially championed by Placide Tempels, and has often been regarded as a successor or disciple of Tempels. As noted by Kaphagawani, Mbiti is widely recognized as one of Tempels' leading followers, driven by a similar passion to demonstrate how African modes of thought differ fundamentally from Western perspectives (72). Like Tempels, Mbiti sought to present a conceptual framework that revealed the distinctiveness of African worldviews, particularly concerning the nature of personhood and community. Mbiti begins his analysis by discussing the tribal nature of African societies and how this underpins the philosophy of African communitarianism. According to Matolino, Mbiti argues that each African tribe typically shares a common ancestry, language, and set of rituals. Many tribal groups trace their origins whether historically or mythologically to a first ancestor created by God or to founding tribal leaders.

For Mbiti, this worldview closely aligns with African traditional religion, which he sees as central to African communal life (65). Regarding tribal identity, Mbiti maintains that each tribe possesses a distinct religious system integral to its cultural identity. Individuals are born into their tribe, and tribal membership is generally fixed and unchangeable. While it is possible for someone to be ritually adopted into another tribe, such occurrences are rare and apply to both Africans and non-Africans. Mbiti emphasizes that tribal identity remains a potent force in modern African societies, though its intensity may fluctuate depending on prevailing social or political conditions (Mbiti 135). This tribal dimension is critical in understanding African communitarianism. Before engaging with the broader notion of community, one must first recognize the foundational role of tribal groups in shaping personal and collective identity.

Mbiti further asserts that the kinship system in traditional African society is a key organizing principle, governing the lives of all tribal members. He describes kinship as an expansive network that extends horizontally across the entire community. Within this system, every individual is connected to others through familial roles whether as a brother, sister, father, mother, cousin, uncle, aunt, or in-law. Thus, kinship weaves individuals into a tightly knit social fabric where identity is relational and embedded in communal belonging (Mbiti 136). John Mbiti significantly advanced the philosophical discourse on African communalism, building on the foundational work of Placide Tempels. While some critics have labeled him a mere follower or disciple of Tempels, such a characterization oversimplifies Mbiti's contribution. Though he shared Tempels' objective of articulating the uniqueness of African thought systems particularly in contrast to Western individualism Mbiti developed a more theologically and anthropologically grounded framework, one that deeply explores the interplay between personhood, religion, and community in traditional African societies. As Kaphagawani notes, Mbiti distinguished himself as one of the most prominent interpreters of Tempels' line of thought, driven by a passion to illuminate the distinctiveness of African communal epistemology and ontology (72). His core project was to emphasize that African philosophy does not conceive the individual as an isolated being, but as one embedded within a dense web of communal, religious, and cultural relations. At the heart of Mbiti's communalist philosophy is his examination of the tribal structure of African societies. He argues that tribal identity forms the basic social and moral unit through which personhood is constituted. According to Matolino, Mbiti contends that each tribe or ethnic group in Africa claims a common ancestry, speaks a shared language, and observes similar rituals. Often, this common ancestry is traced mythologically to a primordial ancestor or divinely created first human, thus intertwining tribal identity with cosmology and religion (65). This association underscores Mbiti's view that African communalism is inseparable from traditional religious beliefs.

Mbiti further maintains that each tribe in Africa has its own distinct religious system that defines and shapes the identity of its members. Tribal membership is typically fixed by birth and rarely subject to change. Even when ritual adoption into another tribe occurs, such cases are exceptional and do not reflect a general openness to fluid identity. As Mbiti explains, "these are the main features of an African tribe, people, society or nation" (135). The implications of this view are profound: identity is not chosen but inherited, and it remains a central marker of one's social and moral standing. Tribal affiliation, therefore, continues to exert influence even in contemporary African nation-states although its intensity may fluctuate with changing socio-political contexts. This conception of tribal

identity is foundational to Mbiti's communalism because it foregrounds the idea that community is not an abstract collective but a concrete network of tribal affiliations through which individuals derive their sense of belonging. In Mbiti's framework, to speak of "community" in African terms is to acknowledge the primacy of these smaller units of identity formation. Another central pillar in Mbiti's account of African communalism is the kinship system, which he describes as the organizing principle of traditional African life. Kinship, for Mbiti, is not a narrow family relation but a vast social network that includes every member of the tribe. It forms a lateral, all-encompassing structure that ties individuals to others in a complex web of relational roles: brother, sister, mother, father, aunt, uncle, cousin, in-law, and more (136). This kinship model establishes obligations, duties, and rights that are not based on contracts or individual volition but on inherited roles and collective responsibilities. Through this lens, Mbiti presents a vision of the human person not as a self-contained individual, but as a being-in-relation. The self is defined by community, and community in turn is shaped by religious, tribal, and familial interconnectedness. His famous dictum, "I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am," (137) encapsulates this worldview and contrasts sharply with Western liberal philosophies that emphasize personal autonomy and individual rights.

In sum, Mbiti's contribution to the philosophy of African communalism lies in his systematic exploration of how identity, religion, and kinship intersect to shape the African conception of personhood. Rather than being a mere disciple of Tempels, Mbiti offers a nuanced and theologically informed perspective that foregrounds the lived realities of African societies. His work challenges scholars and philosophers to reconsider the often-assumed universality of Western individualism and instead engage with the relational fabric of African thought. The view properly situates Mbiti within a lineage of African philosophy, identifying him as an important successor to Placide Tempels. It acknowledges Tempels' influence but also emphasizes Mbiti's originality. This is valuable because it prevents an overly simplistic reading of Mbiti as merely an imitator, recognizing his more nuanced and developed articulation of African communalism. Mbiti's position is largely uncontested Other African scholars like Kwame Gyekye, Paulin Hountondji, and V.Y. Mudimbe have critically examined African communalism, challenging Mbiti's emphasis on communalism as absolute and fixed.

Ifeanyi Menkiti and the Communitarian Conception of Personhood in African Thought

Ifeanyi Menkiti stands as one of the foremost contributors to the philosophical discourse on personhood within traditional African thought, particularly in contrast to Western individualist paradigms. Menkiti's work offers a critical evaluation of the ontological and moral foundations of African communalism, especially regarding how identity is constituted. Menkiti begins his analysis by emphasizing the stark divergence between Western and African conceptions of the person. According to him, Western philosophical traditions often isolate specific traits whether rationality, consciousness, or autonomy as defining features of personhood. These traits are abstracted from the individual and held up as universal criteria for being considered a person. In contrast, Menkiti asserts that the African worldview fundamentally rejects this atomistic model. He argues, "The African view of the person is decidedly sociocentric. It denies that persons can be defined by focusing on this or that physical or psychological characteristic of the lone individual. Rather, a person is defined by the surrounding community" (Menkiti 171). Personhood, therefore, is not an intrinsic

property but a relational achievement a status granted and recognized within the communal context. Further reinforcing this position, Menkiti posits that it is the community not abstract reason or biological birth that determines when a person can be regarded as such. He writes, “This is a matter best decided by the community, since the reality of the communal world takes precedence over the reality of individual life histories, whatever these may be” (171). In other words, the community serves as both the moral compass and existential anchor through which individuals come to acquire personhood. Identity, for Menkiti, is a becoming that unfolds within the normative framework of the communal order.

Supporting Menkiti’s communitarian thesis, the Nigerian philosopher Godwin Sogolo adds that the African conception of a person is grounded in the observable practices, norms, and lived realities of a people. He maintains that “the African conception of a human person refers to a set of beliefs or a picture of a person in the form of empirical generalization” (90). Sogolo is critical of attempts to universalize the concept of personhood through abstract theorization divorced from real-life experiences. For him, personhood must be understood within the cultural and existential frameworks of specific communities. Theories that are not reflective of communal experience, he argues, may hold academic value but lack existential significance. This pragmatic orientation reveals an important feature of African communitarianism: what matters is not hypothetical capacities or philosophical constructs, but the actualization of one's humanity through communal participation. In this view, personhood is dynamic, contingent upon moral behavior, social responsibility, and reciprocal engagement. As Sogolo rightly notes it is not enough to theorize what a person is capable of; what truly matters is how those capacities are realized within the society (90). Menkiti's thought is further echoed by Bernard Matolino, who affirms that “Menkiti contends that the individual comes to be aware of herself through the community (71). At the heart of Menkiti’s position is the rejection of Western philosophical tendencies that define a person based on isolated, intrinsic attributes such as rationality or memory. In his words, “in the African view, it is the community which defines the person, and not some isolated static quality of rationality, will or memory” (172). This philosophical stance underscores that identity is relational and developmental, not fixed or innate. The individual attains full personhood only by maturing into the communal values and completing the rites that mark social and moral milestones.

Menkiti draws on the concept of muntu in African traditional thought, which implies that to be considered a full person is to exhibit a “plenitude of force” a term closely tied to one’s ability to fulfill moral and social expectations. He asserts that “the attainment of such a status is based on the belief that the concept of muntu in Africa includes an idea of excellence or plenitude of force at maturation” (173). Those who fail to develop this fullness of being—whether through neglect of social obligations or lack of moral integrity—may be regarded as non-persons. Menkiti illustrates this with the phrase ke muntu po (translated as “this is not a person”), referencing individuals who fall short of the required communal standards of moral completeness (173). This philosophical anthropology challenges the Western notion that simply being born human guarantees personhood. Menkiti insists that “it is not enough to understand a person as a biological organism with certain psychological traits”. Instead, one must undergo a gradual and sustained process of socialization and ritual transformation to reach the ideal of personhood (174). These transformations are not possible in isolation. The individual must be nurtured and morally cultivated by the community, for “without other members of the community one cannot go through social

transformation" (174). Thus, the community is both the arena and the agent of personal development. The Ghanaian philosopher Kwasi Wiredu supports this line of thought, stating that "the concept of a person is a social concept before it is anything else. Personhood is not an automatic quality of the human individual; it is something to be achieved" (15). Menkiti further emphasizes that the community not only nurtures the individual but also sets the normative standards to which the individual must conform. He asserts that individuals are expected to internalize and uphold these societal prescriptions if they are to be recognized as full persons. As he puts it, "personhood is something at which individuals could fail, at which they could be incompetent or ineffective, better or worse" (173). This means that personhood is not just a static status, but an evaluative achievement, constantly assessed by how well one embodies communal values. Rituals of incorporation and mastery of communal ethics are therefore crucial for transforming a biologically born human into a socially complete person.

The text clearly outlines Menkiti's core argument that African thought regards personhood as a social and moral achievement rather than an inherent, fixed attribute. It emphasizes the contrast between Western individualism and African sociocentrism, making Menkiti's position lucid. The inclusion of Godwin Sogolo and Bernard Matolino enhances the discussion by showing that Menkiti's ideas reflect a broader African philosophical tradition. Citing Sogolo's emphasis on practical, communal experiences as the basis for personhood strengthens Menkiti's claims.The view skillfully integrates Menkiti's words especially his famous argument that "the community defines the person" which keeps the discussion grounded in primary sources and Menkiti's intended meaning. The text successfully establishes the contrast between Western individualism (focused on autonomy and rationality) and the African communitarian paradigm, helping readers appreciate the cultural and epistemological differences that shape conceptions of personhood. The assessment could benefit from acknowledging scholars like Kwame Gyekye who argue for a moderate communitarianism, which allows some room for individual rights and autonomy. Without this counterpoint, the view remains one-sided and does not fully address ongoing debates in African philosophy. The discussion would be richer if it included real-life examples or social practices demonstrating how communal validation of personhood operates in African societies. This would help bridge the gap between Menkiti's theory and its practical application. The view, like Menkiti's theory, could be critiqued for neglecting personal dissent and alternative identities. If community validation is paramount, what happens to those who hold beliefs or make choices outside communal norms? A more nuanced discussion could explore the tension between individual self-expression and communal expectations. The view implies that Menkiti's framework applies across all African societies equally. However, it would be valuable to consider contemporary urban African settings, where globalizing influences, migration, and technology may lead to more individualistic notions of identity that complicate Menkiti's classic communitarianism. The text accurately captures Gyekye's middle-ground position. Unlike Menkiti's and Mbiti's more radical communalism, Gyekye acknowledges the importance of community in shaping identity, while also protecting the individual's moral autonomy and critical reason. Gyekye's critique is convincingly presented — especially his rejection of Menkiti's view that personhood is a graduated status achieved mostly in old age. The text highlights Gyekye's concern that this implies a troubling hierarchy of moral worth based on age or communal recognition. The

view underscores Gyekye's emphasis on the intrinsic capacity of each individual for reason, choice, and self-reflection, distinguishing him from more radical communitarians.

Kwame Gyekye's Moderated View of African Communitarianism

Kwame Gyekye, a prominent voice in African philosophy, critically interrogates the perspectives advanced by thinkers such as John Mbiti and Ifeanyi Menkiti regarding African communitarianism. While acknowledging the centrality of community in traditional African thought, Gyekye is particularly concerned with what he terms the exaggerated communalism promoted by these thinkers. He critiques their versions of communitarianism as radical and philosophically untenable, arguing that their insistence on the community's ontological and epistemic primacy over the individual undermines the moral and rational agency of persons (39). A major contention Gyekye raises against Menkiti is the notion that personhood is not inherent but acquired through one's increasing integration into communal life, typically over an extended period and ideally in old age. Gyekye finds this claim deeply problematic, especially Menkiti's use of terms such as "full person" or "more of a person," which he considers logically incoherent and philosophically awkward. He questions the criteria for such moral graduation, asking what specific excellences qualify older individuals to possess personhood to a greater degree than the young (39). Beyond the issue of moral maturation, Gyekye strongly objects to the lack of recognition for individual autonomy in Mbiti and Menkiti's frameworks. As Matolino explains, Gyekye contends that while human beings are inherently social and shaped by their communities, they are not reducible to those social contexts. Gyekye emphasizes individual capacities such as moral reasoning, virtue, and the ability to make independent decisions—traits which, he argues, play a crucial role in shaping personal identity and moral responsibility (77). According to Gyekye, even within a communitarian structure, individuals possess what he describes as "mental features" that allow them to critically engage with their cultural norms. He writes, "In light of the autonomous or near-autonomous character of its activities, the communitarian self cannot be held as a shackled self, responding robotically to the ways and demands of the communal structure" (55). He insists that the communitarian self is not intellectually passive or morally enslaved to societal dictates; rather, it maintains the ability to step back, evaluate, and even revise the communal values it inherits.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study underscores communalism as a vital ethical foundation that continues to hold profound relevance for African societies. Despite the increasing erosion of traditional communal values due to globalization, individualism, and socio-political disruptions, communalism remains a robust moral framework that promotes respect, solidarity, justice, and the common good. The findings demonstrate that its core principles can help bridge moral gaps, foster social cohesion, and inspire inclusive and humane policymaking in contemporary contexts. To realize this potential, there is a need for a deliberate and sustained reorientation toward communal ethics in education, governance, and society at large. By reviving and integrating these communal values into daily practice and policy, African societies can cultivate lasting solidarity and mutual well-being, ensuring that communalism continues to guide and enrich ethical discourse and social life across generations.

The African moral worldview is distinctively communal and behavior-oriented. John S. Mbiti underscores this by asserting that African morality is fundamentally societal rather

than spiritual, emphasizing conduct over essence. For Mbiti, morality in African societies is dynamic, meaning it is evaluated based on actions rather than abstract attributes. Acts of kindness or generosity become virtuous only when performed; similarly, murder becomes morally reprehensible only when committed within the societal framework (Mbiti qtd. in Murove 31). In this context, moral identity is enacted rather than simply possessed. Ifeanyi Menkiti takes this argument further by insisting that morality is a prerequisite for personhood in African traditional thought. A person who exhibits moral virtue through generosity, selflessness, and community service is recognized as a "full person," while those who act immorally or selfishly are not regarded as true persons in the philosophical sense. Menkiti argues that the community has no place for individuals who do not contribute to the collective well-being, thereby excluding immoral individuals from full personhood (Menkiti 173).

This perspective is echoed by Peter Paris, who notes that moral development in African societies is a lifelong process, shaped by the individual's constant interaction with societal norms and communal expectations. According to Paris, the cultural institutions and rituals of the community play a formative role in shaping the moral life of the individual, a process that is never complete until death (Paris 42). Thus, moral identity is not a static attribute but an evolving communal construct. Building on these insights, Kwame Gyekye proposes a moderate communitarianism, which centers on the idea of a community of mutuality. For Gyekye, whether in traditional mono-cultural settings or in modern multi-ethnic political spaces, a community is understood as a network of individuals who are connected through interpersonal relationships and shared values. Such a community is characterized not by rigid collectivism, but by cooperative interdependence and mutual respect (Gyekye 35). Within this model, individuals are seen as social beings embedded within a web of moral obligations, but still capable of autonomous thought and action.

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