

On a Communitarian Ethos, Equality and Human Rights in Africa

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1 Introduction

In this paper I shall look at the communitarians' accounts of human rights in Africa as conceived by scholars writing on the African experience. I shall explore their understanding of the notion of equality, and their ideas on human rights in terms of a proclaimed African communitarian ethos and proceed with a critique of these notions. I argue that despite many African thinkers' insistence that African communitarianism does encapsulate a respect for the individual's rights, dignity and liberties, communitarianism (whether it be extreme or moderate) does not enfold a paradigm of individual human rights-claims, but instead embraces an authoritarian and sexist paradigm.

I argue that the legacies of African communalism, humanism and egalitarianism, as claimed by many eminent scholars, are founded on a mythologised and romanticised ideal of African societies and that African philosophers are trying to give a more substantial status to the communitarian ethos in modern Africa, when in terms of reality and as far as certain traditional human rights are concerned, it is merely a straw puppet. I shall maintain that an increasing amount of revisionist historical and anthropological evidence, and closer analyses of African proverbs and sayings by writers and feminists, are questioning the legacies of the models of communitarianism and egalitarianism put forward by African philosophers. The consequences of these legacies are not as straightforward or seamless as the philosophers would have us believe. Drawing on anthropological evidence, analyses of African proverbs, and critiques by African women writers and feminists, I shall maintain that attempts by African male philosophers to lay a foundation for the recognition of individual human rights, based on democratic principles as they themselves envisage, nevertheless reflect a gendered perception of the notion of

rights, especially insofar as the reality of the status and rights of women throughout Africa are concerned.

In my analysis of some of the communitarian arguments of African intellectuals and how these are understood within a normative framework with reference to human rights in modern Africa, I shall focus on the following claims embraced by African philosophers in their defence of a communitarian ethos for Africa: (i) that the defining characteristic of African societies is communitarian; (ii) that the community has ontological primacy over the individual; (iii) that the nature of traditional African societies is egalitarian; and (iv) that an African communitarian ethos accommodates respect for the dignity and liberties of the individual and thus incorporates individual human rights. The four claims are central issues in African philosophy and have arisen in the course of the twentieth century as a response to the forces of the west's intellectual and philosophical paradigms which, along with the economic and political exploitative realities of colonialism, overwhelmed the cultural heritages of the colonised African.

African philosophy is not a static entity based on a singular response to colonialism but continues to develop as a result of ongoing interchanges between cultures who are all in transition. This latter aspect is the subject of a separate study though and accordingly I shall limit my critique to the four central tenets listed above and embraced by African philosophers.

2 The Legacies of Communitarian Africa

Every human society is characterised by a particular social structure or patterned arrangement of roles and status sets which are closely linked with economic organisation, legal and political standards and sanctions of a given community. The patterned arrangement in a given society reflects a specific public perception of person, and in its turn, reflects a conception of human rights.

Broadly speaking, concerns about human rights presently fall into two schools: liberal and communitarian. *Liberals*¹ give primary moral value to individual human beings and believe that the individual has autonomy and dignity and therefore

¹ Many people are inclined to equate a liberal perspective with capitalism, especially on the basis of the latter's emphasis on the individual's rights to property. I disagree with this view. Although capitalism is honoured by many liberal countries, it is not correct to argue that liberalism necessarily emerged as the ideological justification for the rise of capitalism, and that the value it places on the autonomous individual is simply a glorification of the pursuit of self-interest in the market. Quite to the contrary, most liberals insist that justice requires regulating the market to ensure equality of opportunity and of resources.

should be free to express his or her unique qualities and dispositions and that these should be respected by the community and the state. Liberals base the notion of human rights on the democratic basis of basic civil and political rights of all citizens as individuals and insist that since the individual's interests can easily be threatened, all citizens should be protected against the oppression of the state and against collective authoritarianism.

In contrast to the liberal perspective, *communitarians* emphasise the value of specifically communal and public goods, and conceive of values as primarily rooted in communal practices. They argue that the community rather than the individual, the state, or the nation is the ultimate originator of values. In their analysis of human rights, group or communal rights rather than individual rights are emphasised. Accordingly, for the survival and the preservation of the community and, hence, its members' personal lives, it would be perfectly justifiable for some individual rights and acts to be restricted or even banned—especially those rights-claims of individuals whose actions are not in harmony with the ways of society and are considered to pose a threat to the maintenance of the 'good' of the community at large.

But what do the scholars of Africa say about the relationship between the individual and its community and by extension about human rights in Africa? A communitarian ethos is embraced by many African scholars as a solution for the alienations and disintegration of ethical values and social institutions in modern African life. They claim that the roots of a communitarian ethos go back to indigenous African societies and that the social structure of these was communitarian (communalistic) in character. They believe that in traditional African societies, the principles of *communality*, for example the communal ownership of land ('the non-ownership of land by individuals on a private basis'), *egalitarianism* ('the equality of all human beings'), and *solidarity* ('mutual dependence and co-operation') were held. With *communitarian* they mean a social arrangement where the community is not conceived as a mere association or a sum total of isolated individuals, but as a unity in which the individual members are linked by interdependent relationships, sharing common values and working towards common goals.

This view is shared by post-colonial African intellectuals such as Nkrumah, Senghor, and Nyerere, who advocated African socialism as a viable solution for the problem of uniting people(s) into nation-states and tribal units (real or constituted by colonial government) which traditionally had different and often conflicting socio-economic and political systems. Contemporary African philosophers and scholars on African cultures such as Gyekye, Gbadegesin, Okolo, Okafor, Khapoya and Okoye are advancing the same kind of argument.

In Ghana, after political independence from Britain, Kwame Nkrumah (1964:73) observed:

... if one seeks the social-political ancestor of socialism, one must go to communalism In socialism, the principles underlying communalism are given expression in modern circumstances.

And the Senegalese political leader, Leopold Senghor (1964:49 & 93) states:

Negro-African society is collectivist or ... communal, because it is rather a communion of souls than an aggregate of individuals Negro-African society puts more stress on the group than on the individual, more on solidarity than on the activity and needs of the individual, more on the communion of persons than on their autonomy. Ours is a community society.

Here Senghor clearly emphasises the communal nature of African societies and the precedence the community takes over the individual. In this perspective Senghor is joined by Julius Nyerere who advocates *Ujamaa* as the ideal of social solidarity where people agree to subordinate their individual interests to the interest of the common objective of the collective. He maintains that *Ujamaa* emphasises

the Africanness of the politics we intend to follow ... it brings to the mind of our people the idea of mutual involvement in the family (Nyerere 1968:2)

and regards all human beings as members of this ever extending familyhood.

Several other contemporary African philosophers also support the view that African societies are community-orientated or collectivist societies. Kwame Gyekye (1992:102), a Ghanaian philosopher and scholar on traditional Akan culture, maintains that the communitarian aspects of African social-ethical thought are reflected in the '... communitarian features of the social structures of African societies' and that these features are not only outstanding, but the 'defining characteristics of those cultures'. Thus, the sense of community that characterises social relations among individuals is 'a direct consequence of the communitarian arrangements'. Gbadegesin (1991:65), a contemporary Nigerian African philosopher who focuses particularly on traditional Yoruba culture, observes that the

value that traditional Yoruba place on community and communal existence with all its emphasis on fellow-feeling, solidarity and selflessness ... leads directly to the social order of communalism.

He concludes that the social structures of African societies are communal—where human persons are conceived as communal beings embedded in a context of inter-dependence sharing the same common interests and values.

Chukwudum Okolo (1995:397), another Nigerian African philosopher, stresses the communal nature of African societies too in claiming that the African, through 'cultural upbringing', is not individualistic: 'There is no question of rugged individualism in outlook and life-style so characteristic of the European or the American'.

All these views, however, display a sentimental concern with the communitarian nature of African communities. By saying this, I do *not* claim that the social arrangement of traditional African societies were not *in general* communalistic. What I do claim is that this concern or entertainment with the collectivity displays a tendency to exaggerate African societies' unique communally-orientated character. Such an exaggeration is a sweeping generalisation about the actual ways people conduct and live their lives and reflects a tendency to romanticise Africa's past. African intellectuals claim that the social order of any African community is communal, but by claiming this, they implicitly render the social structure of these pre-colonial societies as static and unreceptive to change. Over thousands of years some communities were engulfed by others, or in turn absorbed into or over-run by other communities. Depending on the social and/or political structure of victorious communities, the level of communitarianism ebbed and flowed regularly. In addition, many, if not all, communities were influenced by the dynamics and personal-ities of the family, age-set, clan, ethnic and tribal leaders and elders. From recent social anthropological and ethnographic studies, analyses of post-colonial women's writing, proverbs, languages and legends², it is becoming clear that traditional African societies were not isolated, but dynamic structures which had frequent and often violent intra-cultural, political and economic contact with other ethnic groups and societies radically different from their own. That is to say that there was continuous transculturation with communities which had religious, social, political and economic systems different from their own. The common good of one community was often in conflict with the common good of another. Ethnographic accounts, personal testimonies and oral histories increasingly reveal that the internal dynamics of communities were often less than egalitarian.

In reality, there has often been an involved and convoluted interpersonal stratification with regard to the private ownership of land; class differences between 'big men' and serfs which affected the role the individual could play in community affairs³; and between ordinary people and royal courts. Wealth also played a role in an individual's standing in a community.

² These studies include Berman & Lonsdale (1992a; 1992b) on the Kikuyu; the Comaroffs on the Batswana; Wilmsen et al on the Kalahari San; Schipper (1991) on proverbs and sayings; and Nfah-Abbenyi (1997) on women's literature south of the Sahara.

³ See Kenyatta (1965) on the Gikuyu system of land tenure and Berman & Lonsdale (1992a; 1992b) on violence and ethnicity, and state and class in Kenya.

Furthermore, it is well-known that social stratification in any given society never occurs in terms of one fixed pattern only. This implies that it is erroneous to define societies as *either* communitarian, *or* individualistic. It is more often the rule than the exception that communality and individuality coexist on different levels in the same community. In the same way, sociological studies of rural communities in Europe and America, two regions unquestionably associated with individuality and liberalism, show that collectivist orientations are traceable and still discernible in the ways of life of such communities' members. Conversely, an individualistic orientation is discernible in the lifestyles of members of rural communities of Africa which are proclaimed as being communalistic⁴.

The west's concern with individuality and Africa's concern with the collectivity are both extremes of the same continuum. In an analysis of Buchi Emecheta's women characters, Iyer (1996:124) aptly points out the actual reality that:

All cultures expect conformity within a given framework, and 'individualism' or 'individuation' is tolerated or in some cases glorified only when it falls within parameters considered acceptable to and supportive of the operative ideology. The prevalent notion that Western culture glorifies individualism is by and large a fallacy, since it encourages only aspects of individualism which perpetuate the dominant belief system, such as economic individualism, while in general taking a hostile stance toward manifestations of individualism which seem to threaten the status quo.

To a large extent the realities of the collectivist society are not extreme either. In support of this view I refer to a well-known Akan legend expressed by Ama Ata Aidoo in her play *Anowa*. In Akan culture, this legend was often told to children by their parents. A brief summary of the legend would reveal that the main character, *Anowa*, refuses to marry the man selected by her parents according to community customs. Instead, she marries the man of her choice, Kofi Ako. Accordingly, they are sent into exile by the community. Contrary to the community's predictions, the two lovers do not fall into a state of misery and beggary but by following fair trading principles they become extremely wealthy and successful. Fair trading principles according to *Anowa* did not involve keeping slaves and serfs as was the custom in

⁴ To a large extent legends and African literature provide numerous examples of individualism. However, until recently, analyses of literary works tended to emphasise communality rather than individuality, keeping in line with postcolonial political and philosophical trends in Africa. Recent articles in *Research in African Literatures*, *Current Writing* etc. reveal that critics are taking a closer look at the hybrid constituted individual.

that region long before the slave trade was expanded to the Americas by the West. Slavery or serfdom were often the only destiny for members of communities who were decimated by drought, famine, sickness or war.

The legend ends on a tragic note however. Both Anowa and her husband commit suicide on grounds of irreconcilable differences regarding slavery and children. Despite their wealth, Anowa resists keeping slaves, Kofi Ako however, wants to reclaim his full status within community standards by keeping them. I find this legend worthy of notice in that Anowa defies community tradition by making her own choice irrespective of what was expected of her by the community. Anowa and Kofi Ako initially also defy customary politics and economics by acknowledging the human dignity and rights of individuals they come into contact with.

In addition, African literature and history contain many accounts of community members who find the restrictions placed on them by the collective oppressive. Another interesting example is Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, where women who have borne twins as well as outcasts embrace christianity in order to escape the oppression and opprobrium of their community. However, things do fall apart for the main protagonist of the novel, a man who in terms of his rights as a male, has more to lose than the women and outcasts. It would appear that, despite increasing evidence to the contrary, proclamations about communitarian Africa reflect a largely *gendered* concern with the notion of communality. This, in turn, is based on a mythological ideal of pre-colonial African communities' harmonious past.

3 Collectivism and Individual Rights

Up till now, most African intellectuals, postcolonial politicians from the continent, contemporary African philosophers, literary theorists and writers on African life and human rights, have shared the view that human rights are a collective issue (group norms) rather than a matter of individual rights-claims⁵. Although African communitarianism can be broadly divided into radical and moderate perspectives—the former insisting on the moral primacy of the community without consideration of the need of individual rights, and the latter trying to accommodate communal values as well as individual rights by maintaining that both individuality and communality need to be recognised morally and functionally—there is in general a communitarian concern with the collectivity rather than the individual. Both perspectives share the view that human persons are *intrinsically* communal beings, embedded in a context of social relationships and have common values, interests and goals.

⁵ See for instance the following African scholars on human rights who render equal and individual rights unimportant: Mark Anikpo (1990:211-219); Mokwugo Okoye (1990:164); Osita Eze (1990:88-105); and Issa Shivji (1990:70-73).

The Nigerian philosopher, Ifeanyi Menkiti follows an extreme form of communitarianism, asserting the ontological primacy of the community over the reality of the individual's life. He maintains it is

the community which defines the person as person, not some isolated static quality of rationality, will, or memory ... in the African understanding human community plays a crucial role in the individual's acquisition of full personhood (Menkiti 1984:172 & 179).

This communitarian view, however, proceeds from the assumption that the welfare, values and goals of the community are supreme and the overriding consideration for morality and social justice. It stresses the value of specifically communal and public goods and conceives of values as rooted in communal practices. This implies that the individual is submerged in community and that community interests and its continued existence take preference above the will and interests of the individual.

From the logic of Menkiti's argument about the 'ontological primacy' of the community, it follows that community values are not contingent but a necessary condition for personhood. This means that the individual must of necessity be subject to the normative power of the community and is thus not seen as the primary reference point for moral actions. Rather, his or her moral status is linked to the fact that the cultural community is the primary context or social space within which he or she is regarded as a moral agent. In other words, the importance of individual human rights is denied in terms of the priority of group rights.

However, Menkiti's assertion about the ontological primacy of the community over the individual is based on an idealised view and inflation of the importance of collectivity. Although I agree that we cannot do without communities, that people are largely interdependent and that the moral self develops within a social context where culture and history play vital roles, I *disagree* that the self is a mere product of a constitutive collectivity, submerged in the community conceiving of itself primarily as a member of a group and someone who *discovers* 'self' as constituted by a community's values. As with communities, the human person is not a static, one-dimensional and undifferentiated entity, but complex and dynamic. One constitutes 'self' not in terms of one unified identity but in terms of a complex of identities. Thus, to view the moral self to be socially formed from within one shared identity, is an illusion. The self may be formed within several intersecting and often conflicting communities. This hybridity of self-constitution is especially discernible in the growing body of life histories and autobiographies by women in Africa⁶.

⁶ See for instance Marjorie Shostak (1981); Mirza & Strobel (1989); JaneTapsubei Creider (1985); Mariama Bâ (1981) and many other West African writers.

Another point of criticism involves the view that the communitarian self is always the *object* of an ethical community encumbered with a community's values and a perception of the common good, but never a *choosing subject* or a moral agent who can make choices in terms of its own values and ends, and one who can never *change* or *resist*. When claiming that a member of a community simply inherits a set of values and discovers him- or herself primarily as a member of a group, embedded in a context of social relationships, one is also claiming that a community's values are to be taken as an *institutionalised given* or a *sanctioned absolute*.

Possibly one of the better known local examples to the contrary, is the decision taken by Shaka that Zulu men should not be circumcised as this would affect their efficacy as warriors. Circumcision is a rite of passage where boys pass into manhood and *acquire certain rights* as a result thereof. Scrapping the socially sanctioned institution of circumcision is evidence that an individual can effect change. On the other hand, Shaka was the chief and used his standing in the community to bring about the shift in perception—a perception of a new common good.

As with the old, a new social order can easily germinate into a hegemonic social order, a social order which reflects a dominant group's belief of which values and ends are important. In the section to follow, I explore this statement further.

4 African Humanism and the Conception of Women

I have argued that an extreme form of communitarianism tends to exaggerate the communal structure of African societies and that this doctrine with its overemphasis on communal values renders individual rights-claims unnecessary. Kwame Gyekye, however, believes that communitarianism is not necessarily tantamount to a negation of individual rights. He is an advocate of moderate communitarianism and differs from the viewpoint of Menkiti and other radical communitarians, such as Anikpo, Okoye and Osita Eze who consider personal rights for individuals redundant. In an attempt to show that communalism (in this case moderate communalism) does not negate individual rights Gyekye (1992:114) maintains:

[T]he respect for human dignity, a natural or fundamental attribute of the person which cannot, as such, be set at nought by the communal structure, generates regard for personal rights. The reason is that the natural membership of the individual person in a community cannot rob him of his dignity or worth, a fundamental and inalienable attribute he possesses as a person.

Gyekye argues that since respect for human dignity is a fundamental attribute of all persons, individual rights cannot be negated. He develops this argument as follows: The respect for human dignity,

howsoever the conception is derived, whether from theistic considerations or through purely rational reflection on human nature, is linked with, and in fact compels, the recognition of rights (Gyekye 1992:115).

not only in an individualistic but also communitarian context. Gyekye (1995:158) bases his notion of human dignity on the African humanist conception of humankind where the well-being and interests of each member of the community are assured. Thus, according to Gyekye the recognition of individual rights, which includes the exercise of the unique qualities and dispositions of individuals by a communitarian political morality is a conceptual requirement. Failure to recognise this can lead to exaggerating the normative status and power of the community in relation to those of the person, and in its turn this can lead to 'obfuscating our understanding of the real nature of the person' (Gyekye 1992:106).

Gyekye's argument, however, is not very convincing. He fails to see that there is no necessary (inevitable) link between respect for human dignity and the recognition of individual rights, because a conception of human dignity does not guarantee (nor 'generate') regard for personal rights or liberties, especially not for the rights of women. Moreover, a conception of human dignity, even if it is based on the alleged African humanist view of human nature⁷, does not guarantee justice, neither does it necessarily generate equal treatment of persons, especially not equality between men and women with regard to rights or privileges. Thus, in addition to the legacies of the African society's communalistic and humanistic character, there is the legacy of its egalitarian nature that needs to be unpacked.

I have pointed out that African intellectuals claim that African humanism is the conceptual framework on which the African notion of the human person is founded. Now, in addition to this view, it is also held that the African conception of human rights and justice derives from a notion of egalitarianism as it is expressed in traditional African cultures. With egalitarianism they mean that all human beings are equal, because every human being has intrinsic worth or possesses creative humanity. In his analysis of the concept of the human person, Julius Nyerere (1968a:12f) says:

People can accept the equality of man because they believe that all men [sic] were created by God, they can believe it because scientific evidence supports such a conclusion, or they believe it simply because they believe it is the only basis on which life in society can be organized without injustice.

⁷ Many African scholars claim that the social arrangement of traditional Africa is humanistic. See for instance Dzobo (1992); and Okafor (1995) where he maintains that in Africa, 'the sanctity of the human person is regarded as an inalienable and fundamental right'. See also Wiredu (1992-1993).

It does not matter why people accept the equality of man as the basis of social organization; all that matters is that they do accept it.

From this statement one can infer that Nyerere values the equal worth of every human being and that the acceptance of the notion of equality is essential for the realisation of a social organisation based on fair and just principles. Like many other African intellectuals (e.g. Nkrumah, Kaunda and Mbiti), Nyerere bases his notion of equality and morality on the African humanist view of the human being. A contemporary African philosopher, Gyekye (1997:259) supports this view of African morality too. He maintains that, as the outstanding feature of African culture, humanism means:

... to recognize the other person as a fellow human being, which, in turn, means to acknowledge that her worth as a human being is equal to our own ... and at the public policy level, that the basic rights, which intrinsically belong to an individual by virtue of her being human, ought not to be interfered with, subverted, or set at naught.

On this view, Gyekye is joined by Wiredu who agrees that the socio-ethical structure of traditional Africa is humanistic. Drawing out some significant normative consequences of the Akan concept of 'person', Wiredu emphasises that in Akan as in the thinking of many other African peoples, the idea is held that 'every human being has an intrinsic worth because of the divine element in her being' (Wiredu 1995:37).

Now, if it is indeed the case that in terms of African humanism all persons have equal worth as human beings, then why are there inequalities in terms of basic rights and privileges between men and women? What does Gyekye mean when he speaks of 'her equal worth' and 'basic rights' which cannot be subverted? Gyekye criticises Menkiti's viewpoint⁸ that in the African communitarian ethos, priority is given to the duties which individuals owe to the community, and that the rights of individuals are seen as secondary to their exercise of duties. However, although Gyekye insists that rights belong primarily and irreducibly to the individual and that they are a means of 'expressing an individual's talents, capacities, and identity' (Gyekye 1997:62f), he does not address the condition of women and their general lack of rights. In all fairness, Nyerere (1996:312), commenting on aspects of the *Arusha Declaration*, does raise the issue of inequality between men and women in traditional societies:

There were two basic factors which prevented traditional society from full flowering the first of these was that ... there was, in most parts of

⁸ Menkiti (1984:180) expresses this viewpoint in his article.

Tanzania, an acceptance of one human inequality [T]he women in traditional society were regarded as having a place in the community which was not only different, but also to some extent inferior. It is impossible to deny that the women did, and still do, more than their fair share of the work in the fields and in the homes. By virtue of their sex they suffered from inequalities which had nothing to do with their contribution to the family welfare This is certainly inconsistent with our socialist conception of the equality of all human beings

Despite Nyerere's call for the equality of all human beings in a new socialist Tanzania, the predilection to continue with old inequalities continued and does still continue. Thus, it seems that contemporary African philosophers' statements about the high value placed on human dignity and respect for individual rights are rooted in an idealised view of Africa's past. This also casts doubt on their insistence that in post-independence Africa, an African communitarian ethos (even if modified)—which they claim is founded on the egalitarian and humanistic structure of traditional Africa—enfolds respect for the dignity of *all* individuals and hence for their rights and liberties. I am of the opinion that these claims are based on a controversial understanding of the notion of equality and by extension, of the idea of human rights.⁹

There is overwhelming evidence that pre-colonial African communities were not egalitarian, but in reality sexist and discriminatory¹⁰, not only towards women and outcasts but also towards other tribal units and groups. A denial of these facts by many African communitarians and philosophers has negative normative implications for certain human rights, especially the rights of women. With women's rights I do not mean *special rights* for women, for why should the rights-claims of women be different from those any other individual is entitled to? Would the issue of women's rights have been an issue at all if certain discriminating practices do not still exist? When I talk of women's rights, then I have in mind: (a) the right to decide about one's own body, about one's own future, the right to decide whom she wants to marry, and the right to decide in terms of her circumcision; (b) the right to participate

⁹ I define human rights as rights *all* individuals ought to be entitled to because they are human, without regard to gender, race, ethnicity, class or status. Under equality I understand the state of being equal or being on the same level in dignity or worth. This implies that inequalities of rights (social, political, and economic) between men and women, between one class and another, and between one ethnic group and another are not justifiable.

¹⁰ I am not saying that gender and racial discrimination is unique to Africa; Western and Eastern societies are just as sexist and racist, if not to some extent more so.

not only in the domestic sphere, but also to participate in the public sphere of community life, for example the election of chiefs; (c) the right of inheritance; and (d) the right to education and equal career opportunities.

The development and progression of thought on human rights in the twentieth century with regard to these rights-claims by the colonised, women (across the world), minorities (and in the case of South Africa the majority) etc. is the subject of a separate and fascinating study. The 'generation' of human rights-claims I have listed above is linked to South Africa's new Bill of Rights. Although the tenets of the Bill of Rights have neither constitutionally nor in practice been accepted or implemented in most of the world, the ideas on women expressed therein, have been consistently raised at international conferences on women (e.g. Beijing) to which African countries send scores of delegates.

I am aware of differences in perceptions pertaining to women's rights, not only between Western and African women, but also between many African women in rural communities and those living in urban areas. Among those scholars writing on the condition and rights of African women in modern Africa, Florence Dolphyne (1995:238-248) points out that, in her experience as former chairperson of the National Council on Women and Development in Ghana, the majority of women from Western countries favour immediate legislation banning certain African traditional practices such as polygamy and female circumcision. The rationale for this view derives from their negative psychological impact and the risks such practices pose to women's health. Although their counterparts agree that these practices stand in the way of the emancipation of women in Africa, they nevertheless insist that the immediate banning of these practices is not advisable. They argue that it will take some time to make women in rural societies aware of the health-dangers of circumcision and of the negative consequences of some traditional practices to their welfare. Also, Dolphyne maintains that there are certain issues, such as polygamy, extra-marital relations, and the division of domestic labour, that are not perceived as issues among most African women living in rural communities. These women, in contrast to liberated and educated African women in urban areas, do not question the traditional practices because, for them, 'the issue of women's rights is inextricably linked with that of survival' and their concerns 'relate to the provision of the basic necessities of life that will relieve them from the anxieties inherent in their existence' (Dolphyne 1995:242).

I am claiming, however, that in spite of the differences in perceptions and levels of education, the general lack of rights of women throughout Africa nevertheless is a reality that cannot be shifted into the background. Such a cover-up in philosophical circles for instance, serves as an instrument of *silencing critical questions* about the still oppressive status of women and thus perpetuates inequalities and injustices within the spheres of the family, education, power, and career

opportunities. Another way of shifting the importance of women's rights and the issue of sexism into the background is to blame colonialism and white patriarchy for the undermining and disintegration of family ties and communities. On this issue, bell hooks in *Talking Back* (1989:9) has the following to say about the denial of sexism and consequently the compounding of the oppression of women—even in post-colonial or in so-called liberated societies:

Traditionally it has been important for black people to assert that slavery, apartheid, and continued discrimination have not undermined the humanity of black people To acknowledge then that our families and communities have been undermined by sexism would not only require an acknowledgement that racism is not the only form of domination and oppression that affects us as a people; it would mean critically challenging the assumption that our survival as a people depends on creating a cultural climate in which black men can achieve manhood within paradigms constructed by white patriarchy.

To bell hooks, sexism is no better than the racism suffered by black people. However, in the quest for liberation by blacks, issues of manhood and masculinity became conceptually equalled with freedom. Often, then, manhood and liberation followed white patriarchies' paradigms of domination. According to hooks, sexism has always been a political stance connected to racial domination, enabling white men and black men to share a common affair about sex roles and thus upholding the importance of male domination. Thus, the denial of sexism in African societies in terms of white patriarchy as the only form of oppression, serves as an instrument to retain the importance of male domination. The adoption of white patriarchal sexist paradigms for modern liberationists does not reflect a radical shift from traditional African sexism, however.

Analyses of African proverbs and sayings on women reflect a sexist conception of women, rather than a paradigm of equal worth of men and women. Drawing on Akrofi's¹¹ analysis and interpretation of Akan proverbs, Saforo Kwame (1995:253-269) notes that most traditional as well as contemporary African societies' conceptions of women are derogatory and offensively sexist and that African women are seldom considered as the equals of men. He believes that Akan proverbs are reliable reflections of Akan customs, beliefs and ideas, also those concerning men, women, and children. From Akrofi's collection of Akan proverbs on women, Kwame (1995:260-261) mentions the following:

¹¹ Akrofi is an Akan scholar who made a thorough study of Akan proverbs. See in this respect his compilation, *Twi Mmehusem* (Twi Proverbs) (1958).

1. If a woman is beautiful, it is because of her husband.
2. Even if a woman creates a talking drum, she stores it in a man's house.
3. All women are the same.
4. Women are in love with money.
5. If women say 'You are handsome', it means you are in financial trouble.

According to Kwame, all these proverbs usually have a negative connotation in Akan society. They are taken to mean that no matter how great a woman is, she is always dependent on a man, and that 'women are equally unfaithful, bad, evil, or even worthless' (Kwame 1995:261). This view is also confirmed by Minecke Schipper's compilation, *Source of All Evil: African Proverbs and Sayings on Women* (1991). Amongst the Kikuyu for instance, the saying, 'the man comes out of childhood, the woman stays in womanhood' refers to circumcision rights. Where a man obtains manhood and *all his rights*, a circumcised woman does not become entitled to new rights. Other Kikuyu proverbs echo the inherent offensiveness: 'A fool will suck his dead mother' meaning, he is far from wise who tries to derive benefit where none can be get. or 'A woman and an invalid man are the same thing'.

The article, 'In West Africa, paedophilia is an honoured tradition', published in *The Sunday Independent* (December 28 1997) supports Saforo Kwame's view that not only traditional but also modern African societies' conceptions of women are derogatory and sexist. According to this article, pre-adolescent or forced marriage is still common practice throughout sub-Saharan Africa. Forcing girls aged between 7 and 14 into marriage is especially widespread in African countries with large Muslim populations. The marriages occur within clans where the girl is compelled to marry a distant relative, often two or three times her age. But why does the tradition of childhood marriage still prevail in modern African? The article maintains that the reason these communities give is that forcing girls to marry at such young ages protects them from immorality, strengthens clan relationships and honours Islam. The real reason, however, according to Constance Yai¹² is 'that families often receive hundreds, even thousands, of Rands as dowry. It is what keeps this practice alive'¹³ (*The Sunday Independent* 28 December 1997).

The article also stresses the impact of Islamic law on the lives of people in West African societies. According to experts on Islam, the Koran teaches that a girl

¹² Constance Yai is a women's rights activist in Abidjan in the northern Ivory Coast who runs campaigns against the practice of early and forced marriage. She wants to make women aware that they have the right to refuse this type of practice.

¹³ In this context, honest empirical research is needed to trace the relationship between this kind of traditionalist argument and monetary exploitation—especially as it impacts on women within whatever religion or other social formation.

can be married as soon as she can conceive. But does the Koran also teach pre-adolescent and forced marriage, (that when a girl is married, her husband is just under God and that she must obey her husband no matter what? Even if he ties her up, burns her with a piece of iron, locks her up in a room for three or more days without food, beats and rapes her, as was the case with one of the girls discussed in the article. Must she still obey him?

5 Conclusion

In the light of the increasing scholarly evidence and everyday eyewitness accounts that African society is in actual fact not egalitarian, but sexist, it is interesting to notice that the bulk of contemporary African philosophers—who are of course all male—have not addressed the issue of the African conception of women. This is so even though there is a firm opinion of women expressed in African proverbs, legends and beliefs. Philosophers such as Wiredu, Bodunrin and Hountondji who represent the professional African school of thought, went to great lengths to criticise ethnophilosophers for viewing African Philosophy as a collective system of thought. According to them, ethnophilosophers are conservative because they are looking for philosophy in the collective unconscious of the African people. Ethnophilosophy, they maintain, is folk philosophy—it is not philosophy developed by reason and logic which concerns logically argued thoughts of individuals, discussion and debate. Yet, apart from their proclaimed *critical* approach, they remain silent on the issue of women's rights. Their silence on women's subordinated status to men and their sexually determined roles, is even more remarkable when one considers African philosophers' predilection to extract from the *systematic and critical* analyses of proverbs, myths, customs, beliefs and practices African philosophical thought. In their analyses of the African conception of the human person, they neatly include the words 'women', 'she' and 'her' as if they want to suggest that they have not forgotten about women. But, from their literature, there is no evidence that they have adequately thought about the discrepancy of a communitarian ethos and women's inferior, non-egalitarian status and general lack of rights. Perhaps, they think that, in the light of more important issues like working out an adequate political system for modern Africa based on democratic principles—as they themselves envisage—the issue of women's rights is no issue at all!

I conclude. In line with other disciplines which have addressed Africa's past and in many instances revised their perceptions, African philosophers should pause and consider whether the legacies of communitarianism, African humanism and egalitarianism which they hold so dear, would necessarily be a legacy that African women would unquestioningly embrace if they were given the opportunity to voice their analyses of these legacies? A failure to address the issue of the subordination of

women by men in traditional and contemporary African societies, also implies a failure to recognise women as individuals, people with critical minds, and that they may be uncomfortable with, or even worse, indifferent to the roles their gendered societies have assigned them. If African philosophers were to address these issues in terms of finding viable solutions for contemporary Africa, it would entail a radical realignment of their claims in terms of humanism, egalitarianism and human rights. For the moment, they are extremely conservative by retaining the social hierarchies where one sex dominates another, one group suppresses another and where the majority of women in Africa are still regarded as beasts of burden who should obey men, no matter what. The social hierarchies which remain unexamined within the ethos of communitarianism, also conveniently slot into the hierarchies christianity and Islam have brought along with them within the broader global context. The conspiracy of silence on the reality of the condition and rights of women remains, no matter what the legacy in Africa. Embracing a communitarian ethos as a solution for the alienation and disintegration of ethical values and social institutions in modern Africa, and as a foundation for a democratic system, needs a critical rethinking to give substance to claims made by philosophers.

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