

REFLECTIONS ON BERNARD MATOLINO'S CONTRIBUTION TO PHILOSOPHY IN AFRICA

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Introduction

This paper reflects on Bernard Matolino's contribution to philosophy. For heuristic purposes, I stipulate a distinction between what we may call the *negative* and *positive* projects when considering a philosopher's body of work. The 'negative project' of a philosopher's work involves his critical engagement with the extant literature in his discipline. There will be leading thinkers, theories or even schools of thought at any given time and in any discipline. One of the ways the voice and perspectives of a thinker emerges is through critical interaction with these thinkers, theories and schools of thought. I describe this part of the researcher's work as 'negative' largely because it involves criticism, revision or even outright rejection of certain ideas/views/arguments in the literature. The positive project of the philosopher's work focuses on his own distinctive and novel contribution to the field. Beyond criticism, revisions and repudiation of others' ideas/views, a philosopher might also want to posit their own ideas or theories in the discipline. A careful reading of Matolino's work will reveal both dimensions, the negative and positive projects. The aim of this paper is to throw a spotlight on Matolino's work by focusing on the negative project as his contribution to African philosophy (without suggesting that there is no positive project in his *corpus* in philosophy).

I focus on the negative rather than the positive aspect because I believe it reveals an intuition or idea that characterizes the

frustration or even dissatisfaction that informs much of Matolino's writing in African philosophy. Roughly stated, Matolino is deeply frustrated and dissatisfied with the kind of theorizing about Africa that simplifies, misrepresents and romanticizes it. Some of his major works emerge to unfold and criticize the tendency to fail to theorize about and in Africa in light of the facts before us. To demonstrate this primary motif of frustration and dissatisfaction in Matolino's work, consider the examples of the negative projects in his philosophy (I have selected a few to make a point). His major criticisms focus on the ideas of Ethno-philosophy, Afro-communitarianism, African personhood, democracy in Africa, Ubuntu, among others (MATOLINO 2009a; 2011; 2014; 2018). Space will not allow me to delve into all these criticisms in detail. Nevertheless, to make my point, I will proceed as follows; I will touch on a few examples of criticisms, but I will devote much of the paper to his criticism of Ubuntu as an instance of African philosophy.

The Negative Project

In relation to Afro-communitarianism, at least two criticisms stand out from Matolino's intervention. On the one hand, Matolino (2009a) observes that there is no difference between the so-called radical and moderate versions of communitarianism. Both versions of Afro-communitarianism ultimately fail to take rights seriously. In another paper, Matolino (2013) interprets Dismas Masolo's interpretation of Afro-communitarianism to be one that exorcises the ghost of Afro-communitarianism. The 'ghost of Afro-communitarianism' refers to the essentialism that purports to be an authentic representation of Africa, which is a standard feature that characterizes scholars' efforts to capture Africa when attempting to describe Afro-communitarianism. One of the common features of this essentialism is that it does not recognize diversity, difference and complexity as part of the story of communitarianism, which, according to Matolino, Masolo (2004) captures correctly in his interpretation of communitarianism. In relation to democracy in Africa, Matolino argues that appeal to consensus does not hold any promise of a robust form of democracy. The deeper point seems to

be that the assumptions that we hold about human nature as ultimately committed to cohesion and the common good do not have their foundation in fact (the empirical condition of politics in the continent serves as evidence) and do not stand to philosophical scrutiny (MATOLINO 2009b; 2019). In my view, it is his criticism and repudiation of Ubuntu as an ethical and political orientation that captures his negative project. In what follows, I devote my attention to this criticism.

The Bantu people scattered below the Sahara tend to associate with the philosophy of Ubuntu (EZE 2005; LENKABULA 2009). Ubuntu, as an instance of African philosophy, has its own metaphysics, epistemology and axiology (RAMOSE 1999). Since Ubuntu was conceptualized and practised in generally non-literate cultures, African societies had developed oral literature in the form of sayings, proverbs, poetry, songs and idioms (GYEKYE 1995). This oral literature preserved and expressed some of the deepest philosophical views/truths. Ubuntu, as an axiological system is expressed via the saying ‘A person is a person through other persons’. This saying contains a robust moral and political system that might be useful in modern contexts. Scholars such as Ramose (1999), Shutte (2001), Etieyibo (2017), among others, believe that Ubuntu might offer the possibility of a socially just, free and equal society. Politicians and social commentators have also expressed the belief that Ubuntu might serve as an antidote for social ills such as violence, crime, corruption, etc., and that it may lead towards forgiveness and reconciliation.

Matolino’s criticisms of Ubuntu emerge against this faith expressed in it in the literature and broader society. In fact, Matolino’s and Kwindigwi’s (2013) thesis prescribes the end of Ubuntu. Two things seem to motivate this radical view. Firstly, Matolino suggests that often when people invoke Ubuntu, we can interpret that as an express admission that they have no solution for the present pressing problem. He begins the paper by offering an example of a taxi driver that assaults a passenger in full view of other passengers and other members of the community, and none came to the rescue of the victim. The politician that came to the place where the violence had been meted out to the victim merely appealed to Ubuntu or complained about its lack. There was no detailed plan of the actions that would be carried out to protect the

vulnerable from violence. One can also remember the example of President Thabo Mbeki, who introduced the macro-economic policy of Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR). Under this policy, there was economic growth and some jobs were created, but no wealth redistribution. In this context of no redistribution of wealth, Mbeki appealed to the individuals that had accumulated wealth to have Ubuntu and share their wealth. This appeal to Ubuntu, at least if my reading of Matolino is correct, is a statement that there was no plan or solution to solve the challenge at hand, be it the violence in the taxi industry or in relation to the redistribution of wealth. Scholars, politicians and commentators seem to believe that Ubuntu is a magic wand that will solve socio-political issues in our society.

The second thing he does, the major argument for why we should call for the end of Ubuntu, takes an abductive form, at least in my reading. The line of reasoning goes as follows. There are many other projects of recovery, such as the *Ujamaa* of Tanzania under the leadership of Julius Nyerere, which was posited as *the* basis for reimagining contemporary African societies. One common feature of all these projects of recovery, according to Matolino, is that they have had disastrous consequences socio-politically and economically. Ubuntu, as another instance of a project of recovery, is also bound to fail like all these other projects of recovery. Two reasons bolster this argument.

The first reason points to the *ahistorical* nature of the projects of recovery. A philosopher in front of her laptop imagines/constructs a history of an 'Africa' that was peaceful and prosperous. The success of this 'Africa' is attributed to some African value(s), which, when espoused, will produce similar socio-political consequences of peace and prosperity. Often the constructed picture of 'Africa' tends to be a homogenizing and romantic picture that often overly simplifies African societies. Often many of African philosophers working on Ubuntu never offer a historical justification for some of the claims of their belief that Ubuntu, or any other concept, can deliver what they expect from it. This romanticized Africa serves as the major source of inspiration for what Ubuntu can offer. It is this problematic historical content that motivates Matolino to believe that appealing to Ubuntu won't solve problems in Africa. The second reason points to the fact that conditions in pristine and

contemporary Africa are radically different. To transplant a concept/value that supposedly worked in the past and imposing into the present conditions may not necessarily succeed. It is like going back to the wardrobe to look for clothes one used to wear while they were still young. Yes, the clothes may still be beautiful, but they may not fit anymore. New conditions may require us to develop modern and complex concepts that will be more suitable for modern conditions and institutions. Projects of recovery are bound to fail as long as they insist on being ahistorical and not being sensitive to the demands of the complex contemporary life in Africa. There is no communitarianism in modern African societies but unprecedented urbanization. There is no harmony but tribal divisions/factions, war, genocides, poverty, xenophobia, etc.

I think we should appreciate the insight that emerges in Matolino's intellectual engagement with African philosophy and the questions/problems it throws at us. The major lesson Matolino teaches us is to work from a point of the reality that presents itself to us, here and now, and to avoid being fixated on an Africa of our own imaginary invention. The challenge facing philosophers in Africa involves diligently using philosophy to respond to the conditions of poverty, squalor, gangsterism, rape, femicide, failing political projects, corruption, and economic stagnation in Africa, which is the reality that rings true in all corners of the continent. We must seriously evaluate if the extant concepts like that of Ubuntu, Ujamaa, communitarianism, among others, are apt and sufficient to theorize and to re-imagine the future of Africa.

I want to close off by offering one criticism of Matolino's negative project, at least, as it relates to the failed states in Africa, due to their commitment to a socialist interpretation of Afro-communitarianism, or, as we see in South Africa, in the form of Ubuntu. It is true that our post-independence leaders, politicians, commentators and intellectuals may have espoused one value or another as a panacea to Africa's problems. The sad reality has been that *Ujamaa* or Ubuntu, have not ameliorated the socio-political conditions of many African people. In my view, it is hasty to interpret this failure solely as a function of the insufficient and irrelevance of the values of Ubuntu, for example. Before we can meaningfully attribute the failure to the inadequacy of Ubuntu, we need to consider the general political conditions and whether they

are such that they will allow for the ubuntu/ujamaa system(s) to emerge and prosper. The essence of the criticism I am making of Matolino's work and the discipline of African philosophy, in general, is that of a lack of sociological imagination.

At the heart of the idea of sociological imagination is the appreciation of the interconnection between the individual's biography and the larger social forces in society. My criticism is that African philosophers tend to ignore the larger social forces and their impact on individuals. The idea of sociological imagination brings to our attention that individuals are a product of social processes that they have no control over. Moreover, it urges us to be cognizant of these social forces, their complexity and their impact on our lives as contexts of the possible, permissible and even the impossible. When looking at the failure of the projects of recovery, I suggest we may put on the spectacles of sociological imagination. Could there have been global geopolitical institutions that are at play in Africa that sponsor much of what we consider mere failures of the projects of recovery? When we visit Tanzania, in its orientation towards an Africanized socialism, did it fail because of the inherent weakness of the policy, or did it fail because of the global divide of the US and USSR, which had an interest in the direction that Africa would take? Moreover, given that many of the economies in Africa, through economic colonialism, were connected to the European economies and the high debts many of these economies had, could these factors not have played a crucial role in the failure of these societies and their economies? My suggestion is that if our arguments in analyzing the conditions in Africa would lack sociological imagination, which would require that we place the biography of African countries and societies in light of broader structural forces that can serve as a constrain or enabler, we will be quick to criticize the project of recovery whereas the problem could actually be the function of global structural forces that have a direct impact on individual/country/continent's prospect of prospering or failing.

The lack of sociological imagination is a feature of African philosophy. This problem reveals itself in the general aversion to history when analyzing and theorizing about Africa. This aversion to history leads us further into the project of the 'invented Africa' rather than dealing with the real Africa. Another major problem revolves around how much of the work in political philosophy,

particularly in African philosophy, has not been able to identify the forces of domination over Africa in relation to other parts of the world. Colonialism was an obvious instance of the domination of Africa, but today we have not yet developed a political philosophy project that is able to engage critically and fruitfully as a field with the fact of domination of Africa as a place. This problem manifests itself in one of the most influential debates in African philosophy between radical and moderate communitarianism, which pivoted on the idea of human rights. This approach to social justice is not entirely suitable for a place like Africa, which still has to find its place in terms of recognition in the hierarchy of nations. It seems that the top of the agenda should have been to theorize about the conditions of being dominated and considered inferior in the world and to enter the debates about social justice from that vantage point.

Conclusion

It is indubitable that Matolino's criticisms of many aspects of African philosophy were spot on. His consistent rejection of essentialism, which plays itself out in different ways, is worth taking seriously. His observation that there is no single vision of authentic Africa is important as it challenges us to come to terms with the heterogeneity that characterizes Africa historically and now. His call for us to eschew ethnophilosophy and to engage in the real work of reason characteristic of philosophy is of paramount importance. His engagement with projects of recovery, such as found in consensus democracy and Ubuntu, has many lessons to teach us about concepts we use to imagine political futures. We also note that a lack of historical and sociological imagination is a weakness that plagues Matolino's work and much of the work in African philosophy. We need to be able to have a proper grasp of the history that accompanies our subject matter and the place within which it emerges, and we need to have a deep awareness of larger social forces that have a direct impact on our individual (country/continent) behavioural patterns.

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