

## Book Review

# Individualism, Communitarianism and African Philosophy: A Review Essay on *Exploring the Ethics of Individualism and Communitarianism*

edited by

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A collection of critical essays on Professor Segun Gbadegesin, one of the most preeminent figures in African philosophy, is by no mean an insignificant feat. This is all the more so because the volume has the objective of achieving a multidisciplinary interrogation of Gbadegesin's philosophical oeuvre. This is a herculean task because Gbadegesin's philosophical outputs straddles philosophy of culture, bioethics, social and political philosophy, ethics, and African philosophy. With his *African Philosophy: Traditional Yorùbá Philosophy and Contemporary African Realities* (1991), Professor Gbadegesin effectively brought deep philosophical insights into significant issues in Africa's post-colonial malaise. The 16-chapter volume has a sufficiently wide array of significant scholars whose different perspectives provide a wide context within which to situate the brilliant scholarship of Segun Gbadegesin. These chapters all attempted to unravel the core of Gbadegesin's multifaceted philosophical framework. While some confronted some basic elements of his work, like chapter four (human personality), seven (work), and nine (destiny), other chapters took the thematic concerns of, say, communitarianism and ethics as the springboard for further reflections on corruption, nationalism and nation building, citizenship, religion, personhood, leadership, race, justice, gender and the nature of African philosophy. However, with this distribution of chapters, there is a cogent doubt whether the book actually does *critical* justice to the imperative of critically engagement with Segun Gbadegesin's philosophical corpus.

Segun Gbadegesin, alongside Kwasi Wiredu, Paulin Hountondji, Anthony Appiah, V. Y. Mudimbe, Barry Hallen, the late Odera Oruka, Sophie Oluwole, Claude Sumner, Olusegun Oladipo, Kwame Gyekye, Peter Bodunrin,

Dismas Masolo, and many others, constitute the first and second generations of African philosophers that took to task the severe and several racial and colonial philosophical assumptions and ideologies that became the basis for the denigration of Africa. These philosophers were also inexorably drawn into the evolving and prolonged predicament of Africa on the cusp of post-colonial development. And since coloniality ensures that the postcolonial is really not *postcolonial*, then there is a continuing imperative of unraveling Africa's future possibilities at several levels—conceptual, empirical, ideological—through a deep understanding of her dilemma of self-definition and development. Gbadegesin's adoption of bioethics as an area of interest, for instance, outlines a philosophical interest in a significant and unfolding dimension of the logic of science and technology which have been denoted as being inevitable to Africa's being in a modern and globalizing world. But since this is so, Gbadegesin would seem to reason, then Africa cannot afford to arrive at a technological modernity with it guard down. And his philosophical strategy, also adopted by most African philosophers, is to dig deep into indigenous philosophical insights and cultural dynamics as a counterpoint to understanding the offerings of compromised globalization. Gbadegesin's intellectual forte is the Yorùbá culture and its deep and complex philosophical understanding of the cosmos, the society and the human person.

But apart from juxtaposing the indigenous Yorùbá philosophical insights and problematics to the understanding of philosophical problems and fundamentals, Gbadegesin and other African philosophers are also caught in an ongoing discourse about the recovery of African agency and the re-invention of the continent, caught within the complexities of modern and global exigencies. One way of rendering this postcolonial problematic is as an individual-community relationship. And this often betrays a fundamental misrepresentation, especially of the precolonial African societies, that has unfortunately been re-presented in this new volume. This false juxtaposition, what Appadurai calls “metonymic freezing”, seems to place a monolithic “Africa” that is essentially communal to a monolithic “West” which is individualistic, without any critical attempts at complicating or unraveling the historicity of individual-community dynamics within these two contexts. Within this context, therefore, it was easy for Enoch Gbadegesin, in outlining Gbadegesin's interrogation of Western healthcare system, to write in the Introduction: “Gbadegesin balances up his argument by pointing to the possibility and desirability of reconciling the concept of autonomy with the Yorùbá practice of community in healthcare contexts, through a modification of the requirements of the former. That is, the Yorùbá social practice of community can accommodate a slight modification of the requirement of autonomy in its ethics of healthcare. Thus provided the individual patient is autonomously not

against the involvement of family members or even faith groups in reflecting and taking decisions about a course of treatment, we can aver that the autonomy of the patient is not compromised. By the same token the wellbeing or flourishing of that patient is not negatively impacted when such members are involved” (4). It would also seem to me that at some uncritical ontological level, the ubuntu philosophy also shares in this romanticization of the African communal spirit.

In a recent essay (Afolayan, 2017), I alluded to the tension even in Gbadegesin’s understanding of the individual-community relationship. What is called “extreme communitarianism” seems outrightly wrong because it totally excludes individual agency from communal dynamics. It does not seem to depict any coherent sense of the working of socialization and inter-group dynamics in any society. Individual retains agency which could be deployed in some creative, and even surreptitious, ways no matter how harsh and relentless the communal imperatives are.

The task of African philosophy in this regard should not be deemed to be a celebratory approbation of all things African without a keen eye to their complexity and complicated trajectory in a global world. Globalization by its very conceptual nature introduces several ideological and intellectual complexities that challenge the postcolonial mandate of the African philosophers to rethink and reinvent their conceptual repertoire for rescuing the continent. The individual-community relational dynamics stands right in the midst of the ongoing scholarship in Africa to excavate the proper understanding of the African subject. For instance, the idea of Afropolitanism cuts right to the core of who can be regarded as an African in a global world of consumerist capitalism, migrational flux, and diffused cultural influences. African philosophy must necessarily continue to evolve as a worldly philosophical framework with the capacity to hold African and global lifeworlds to intense critique, for the sake of Africa’s being in the world.

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### Reference

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