

Mbiti on Community in African Political Thought: Reconciling the “I” and the “We”

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Abstract

In this article, I draw attention to the value of community in John Mbiti’s philosophy using his famous axiom by reconciling the tension between the individual and community his philosophy envisages. To do this, I offer a reconstruction of Mbiti’s communitarian axiom: “I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am.” Mbiti is considered one of the forerunners of the communitarian debate in African philosophy. His axiom, which describes his idea of Afro-communitarianism, accounts for the importance of individual and community in thinking about social existence in African thought. However, Mbiti’s argument for the direct influence of the community in the formation of the individual is taken to mean the supremacy of the community over the individual. Mbiti’s concept of community has implications for the idea of personhood in that it raises the question of individual agency. This has affected the reception of Mbiti’s contribution to the idea of community in African political thought. While Mbiti’s contributions to Afro-communitarianism transcend the discourse of personhood, I argue that maximising the potential of his idea requires reconstruction and a critical analysis of his axiom. In doing that, I demonstrate that a possible relationship exists between the “I” and “we” in his axiom that represents a harmony between the community and individual and does not suggest a primacy of either but the significance of community. This analysis will enable fair engagement with Mbiti’s conception of community.

Keywords: Mbiti; community; personhood; Afro-communitarianism; African political philosophy

UNISA 
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PRESS

Phronimon

<https://unisapressjournals.co.za/index.php/Phronimon>

#12205 | 15 pages

<https://doi.org/10.25159/2413-3086/12205>

ISSN 2413-3086 (Online), ISSN 1516-4018 (Print)

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Introduction

Mbiti is one of the precursors of modern African philosophy. His work sets the stage for major philosophical problems in African thought, in which the relation between community and individual is one (Mbiti 1970). Mbiti's notion of community lays the foundation for what has become a dominant account of personhood in Afro-communitarian thought. The community is seen as the primary reference point for social and human existence. All forms of social utilities needed for human flourishing are seen from the lenses of the collective. Mbiti deploys religion to facilitate this understanding of community. Religion is conceived as both the property and utilities of the community. Mbiti's understanding of community has been received as mainly favouring the community's interest over individual interest. While this position is arguably true in reference to the communitarian idea of personhood, it does not do sufficient justice to the potential of Mbiti's idea, especially as it relates to the relationship or the interaction that could exist between the community and individuals in African political thought, and the importance of theorising community in African thought beyond the sentiment of primacy.

In this article, I draw attention to the significance of Mbiti's idea of community through a reconciliation of the tension between the individual and community. The reconciliation rests on the assumption that the value of community lies in resolving the issue it generates for defining the individual. I do this by reconstructing Mbiti's axiom: "I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am." I take from Mbiti's philosophy the importance of community in the conception of social arrangement and social order. This is a kind of social order that sees morality, laws and politics as that which should serve the interests of all by enhancing the self-preservation and promotion of individual members of the collective. Central to Mbiti's intention on community is a description of the social arrangement in traditional African societies and the important place the community occupies in the arrangement, as well as the benefit that could be extracted from such a description of the society. It is not to be interpreted mainly as a framework for personhood. A deeper exploration of Mbiti's axiom gives this understanding of community. It also shows that the "I" reference to the individual in Mbiti's axiom cannot be reduced only to the interpretation of the individual in the communitarian personhood discourse.

I begin the article with Mbiti's philosophy of existence and his description of the community and the individual. I illustrate the emphasis placed on the community in Mbiti's thought and how Mbiti's reference to religion in African societies stretches the influence of the community in the conception of persons and human choices in African thought. I show that despite the appearance of the understanding of community on the conception of the individual, we can make sense of some of the ideals of community in Mbiti's axiom relevant to modern African politics. To do this, I address the question of community primacy and significance by analysing the "I" and the "we" in Mbiti's axiom. I conclude that Mbiti's idea, drawn from the analysis of his axiom, promotes the

significance of the community rather than its dominance over the individual. The engagement in this article will help extract the political ideas in Mbiti's philosophy beyond the attention it has received in the philosophy of religion and African metaphysics (see Attoe 2022a, 2022b; Kalumba 2008; Oyekan 2021).

The Mbitian Philosophy of Existence: The Community and the Individual

Afro-communitarianism is the hallmark of African social thought that transcends cultural identity to define African moral and political ideas (Gyekye 1997; Masolo 2004; Menkiti 1984, 2004; Metz 2017, 2020; Molefe 2017). As an idea of social ordering and living, it is characterised by two elements—community and individual. Afro-communitarianism is about the relation between these elements. This relation is troubled by the notion of primacy—the question of which is weightier and to be taken seriously. Traditional African thought arguably subscribed to the primacy and dominance of community over the individual. Kwame Gyekye corroborates this view when he describes Afro-communitarianism as that which “immediately sees the individual as an inherently communal being, embedded in a context of social relationships and interdependence, never as an isolated individual” (Gyekye 1997, 41). This description of the individual thus implies that the essence of the individual cannot be understood outside the essence of the community. Individuals owe their existence and meaning in life to the normative standing of the community. This understanding of the self suggests a disappearance of the self into the system of the collective others and gives rise to tension between community and individual. Reconciling the tension between community and individual in African political philosophy has been the major concern of thinkers; what relationship should exist between the two and the political consequence it holds. Mbiti's emphasis on the community in the Afro-communitarian debate suggests all that can be known of the individual is only with reference to the community.

Placide Tempels's (1959) description of the thought and practices of the Bantu informs Mbiti's thought process and pattern of description and defence of the community in African thought. Tempels describes the individual as a being, ontologically related to the community to which she belongs. “The living [*muntu*] is in a relation of being to being with God, with his clan brethren, with his family and with his descendants. He is in a similar ontological relationship with his patrimony, his land with all that it contains or produces, with all that grows or lives on it” (Tempels 1959, 66 as quoted in Matolino 2009, 161). This description shows the individual must maintain a sustained relationship with these beings and forces for their existence. The beings/forces in which the individual intrinsically shares communion are members of the community, some of which exist as spirits. Mbiti acknowledges the significance of this principle of interdependency in African thought as he pursues the same line of thought in his account.

Mbiti's philosophy is captured in his axiom of communal orientation: "I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am" (Mbiti 1970, 141). This axiom gives a sense of the Afro-communitarian thought that guides social and political engagements in traditional African societies. It is the overarching principle of morality that sees the acknowledgement of the group/community before the "self," where the interests and norms that bind the collective are essential to the formation of the identity and the expression of its individual components. Consequently, social and political ideas in the Mbitian sense are characterised by prioritising the goal and benefits of the community. The pattern of reasoning on issues centres around thinking from the concern of the collective to the individual.

In addition, the Mbitian axiom is a philosophy that emphasises individual members of society as being involved in an unbroken web of obligatory relationships. Apart from the living members of the community engaging in continuous obligations to one another, the different components of the community in African thought, such as the unborn, infants, living, the living dead and the collective immortals, are associated with social performance. While the unborn and infants do not perform duties but hold ethical significance in that they are recipients of duties from the living, the living have an obligation to prepare a better society for them through their moral choices and actions. Following that order, the living dead, and the collective immortals, which Menkiti (1984) refers to as the nameless dead, have a moral capacity for duty to the living. They owe continuous obligations to the human world. This obligatory principle is sustained by an understanding of community, where its components owe their existence to the sustenance of the collective others.

Mbiti's philosophy is parallel to Rene Descartes's "*cogito ergo sum.*" While Descartes's axiom is a defence for the existence and the uniqueness of the self—the "I"—Mbiti's axiom is about the conception of the community and its role in the formation of social order and social living in African thought and in the conception of persons.

Two differing words—"I" and "we"—in the Mbitian axiom represent two important ideas; individuality and collectivity. However, the intention here is not the clarification of the concepts of individuality and collectivity, but to elucidate the relationship between the two different words. This elucidation is meant to demonstrate a socio-political relationship between individuals and the collective imbued in Mbiti's axiom. Between the two words "I" and "we" is a web of relationships. The "I," which symbolises an independent individual, requires the "collective" for its existence—a meaningful existence. I will engage with a brief analysis of both ideas by starting with the idea of the "we."

The Nature of the Community in Mbiti's Thought

In Mbiti's view, the "we" is the community. However, membership in this community transcends the living. The community is a whole web that includes the collective immortals, the living and the generation unborn (Mbiti 1970). The community is both

physical and spiritual in that it is occupied by the living, ancestors and spirits. Another feature of the community is that it is socio-cultural. It is the idea of a community informed by culture, which is referred to in this article as a cultural community.¹ This conception of community transcends the conception of community as an aggregation of self-interested individuals, realising the need for others in achieving their individual goals, choosing to be part of a union to pursue their preferences (see Menkiti 1984).

Mbiti's philosophy of existence captures a sense of meaningful and dignified life that is granted or embedded in the community. Community, in Mbiti's view, is responsible for the creation of the individual, who only exists by living corporately with others. The individual's existence is made possible through the web of social and ontological connections with these collective others. The community is the sole determinant of the choice of identity of individuals dependent on it. The community sets the appropriate form of identity for its members through its conception of personhood, defined by adherence to certain obligations and conformism to certain values. In the Mbitian sense, personhood is defined solely by the structure of the community and not the self. It is the degree of compliance with the socio-cultural norms of the community that differentiates individuals from one another. Mbiti's view contends a notion of the self whose definition of a meaningful life is generated outside the reference to community dependency.

Mbiti strengthens his defence of the influence of community in defining the individual with his conception of religion in African thought. He points out that in African societies, religion serves the purpose of communal utility. It permeates all the activities of both the individual and the community. Religion encapsulates the whole system of being an African. He argues that religion is not self-generated; it belongs to the community. Mbiti posits that each community has its own religion. It is in the religion of the community where an individual belongs and participates and, in turn, is defined. Religion is useful and functional in the conception of the individual and in understanding the bond between a community and its members. Denying the

1 Cultural community involves the social formation of a group of people, usually identified as ethnic communities. Community here is understood as a group of people guided by cultural principles, norms, and morals. It is what Will Kymlicka calls societal culture. Kymlicka (1995, 76) defines societal culture as "a culture that provides its members with meaningful ways of life across the full range of human activities, including social, educational, religious, recreational, and economic life, encompassing both public and private spheres." Importantly, societal culture emphasises territorial integrity and a shared language.

The idea of cultural community is a version of community that has its ontological foundation in culturalism—an idea that holds that "individuals are thoroughly determined by their culture and may only lead a satisfying life within its confine" (see Stjemfelt 2012, 49). This form of community is more enforcing as its values inform almost all aspects of the individual's existence. As Chin Liew Ten notes, we make choices as persons whom our cultures and our historical experiences have shaped. Culture provides a perspective from which to view the world and to interpret events in it (Ten 1993, 7). Irrespective of the religious or social association individuals belong to, the demands of the cultural community still largely influence their existential experiences.

community's religion is simply denying the existence of the self and separating from the source of their existence and kins (Mbiti 1970). This gives the sense that the proof of one's belonging to a community is the demonstration of the tenets of its affiliated religion.

Perhaps the theologian in Mbiti may have influenced what I consider to be his exaggerated account of the centrality of religion to the community. This may influence why he sees religion as a dominant feature of community life. While this may be considered a cheap criticism, we can argue that Mbiti's use of religion as a necessity suggests that members of African societies are, by nature, religious and cannot be otherwise. Following that, being religious is essential to being a person. While evidence shows that not all Africans are religious, Mbiti's position on community ownership of religion further poses the danger that strangers cannot bring their religion to their land of sojourning, as the membership of the community and recognition suggest acceptance of the host religion. While this might pose serious threats to the acceptance of Mbiti's description of traditional African societies, Mbiti's view may be relevant in managing specific contemporary multicultural issues if the idea of acceptance is replaced with a recognition of the religion of the host community.

Mbiti on the Individual and a Critical Interpretation of the "I"

I now move to the second idea of emphasis in the Mbitian axiom—the "I." The "I" captures different forms of individuals. It describes the "self" of the unborn, the infants seeking to attain selfhood—understood as an awareness of their place in the community and the pattern of their life fortune. The "I" captures the self of an adult, an ancestor and what Mbiti refers to as a collective immortal. In African ontology, the being of the unborn and the departed ancestors is as real as that of the living. Being, in African ontology, constantly engages in the process of "becoming." While the unborn are in the stage of becoming to actualise their full human membership of the community, the living are in the same process of becoming to attain selfhood in order to be participatory members of the community. The process of the becoming continues with the living dead taking up their rights of disembodiment, not as mere human beings while still in the living world.

It is important to consider that the "I," which appears to be the opposite of the "we," is ontologically included in the schemes of the "we." The "I" is enmeshed in the "we." If it is not, the Mbitian axiom—"I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am," would have been meaningless. What we would have would be "I am because they are," a form of social relation and existence where the difference between the self and others is made obvious. The "we" can be likened to a universal set that houses the numerous subsets of beings. The form of relationship identified here is a mutual relationship insofar as whatever happens to the whole affects the individual, and vice versa (see Watadza 2016). Also, we may interpret what exists between the "I" and "we" as a form of complementary relationship that makes the difference between them unnoticed. This affirms a social ordering that is guided by the "I" and "we" in a complementary

relationship for self-actualisation, and not “I” and “them” in constant conflict of opposites.

However, the idea of what happens to the “we” happens to the individual, needs further elaboration. Two ideas are suggested. One, it suggests that a necessary good or evil that comes to the community/group naturally affects every individual. This is a form of a naturally ordered explanation, which can only be true if members of groups share the same ontological status that connotes a shared fate. The other dimension to this idea means individuals have a moral demand to share in the benefits and burden or the joy and sorrow of any member(s) of the community. This is a form of ethical standpoint that defines community life. Therefore, a commitment to the wellness of any members of the community fulfils the obligation the individual has to the belonging community. While Mbiti’s account holds both the ontological and moral dimensions, we can emphasise the moral dimension by harnessing its practicability for contemporary relevance. It is defensible to see the relationship between the “I” and the “we” and the individual’s obligation to the community as a moral responsibility, not a definition of their being.

The emphasis on community in African thought is borne out of the interpretation of human existence enhanced by the principles of “we,” where the “we” is a unified idea of the different components of community. We can see in Mbiti that the individual requires the collective for meaning-making. The “we,” as illustrated above, recognises the “self” and “others” as independent components of a unified reality. It could be interpreted as a principle where the individual does not reject or deny the sense of the self amid the collective existence.

In the Mbitian community, the “I” is a component of the “we”; it is not separated from it but ontologically and socially included. The “I” in Mbiti’s axiom is a recognition of the existence of individuals as distinct and a part of a whole. The “I” should not be seen solely as a moral “I” as in communitarian personhood. It is simply an acknowledgement of the various human components of the community. At the level of introducing the morality of persons to the notion of the community, the “I” loses its fundamental ontological meaning as a moral definition is introduced into it.

The question of primacy, which I argue beclouds the significance of Mbiti’s ideas for social arrangement, is owed to the idea of what constitutes a person in African philosophy and what distinguishes the same from an ordinary human. As Menkiti explains, “individual merely refers to the different forms of agency in the world, the individual person represents a movement from the raw appetite level to one that is marked by the dignity of the person” (Menkiti 1984 cited in Matolino 2011, 26). This new meaning results in different species and categories of the self—individual humans and individual persons. While the first reference to “I” does not raise any tension, the second raises numerous moral and political tensions from which personhood theorists

have tried to rescue the community in African thought. This tension revolves around the question of autonomy, freedom, and rights.²

A conception of personhood where individuals live a meaningful life only when they prioritise the demands of community norms and values such as sharing their religious beliefs, being married, having the potential for progeny, and contributing to the family and community, among others (see Wiredu 2004; 2008), will always create tension for the recognition of self-expression and identities that are outside of the scheme of the community standard. While non-persons (adult humans) are non-conformists to cultural norms and values, the problem with non-conformity that resulted in the non-person status of certain individuals may not be the lack of interest in sharing community with others, but human nature to express agency and the intention to avoid a conception of the self outside of the individual. Consequently, the non-person status arising from the communitarian idea of personhood, without doubt, supposes a tension for autonomy, individual rights and freedom. The tension has generated an endless debate, with scholars either defending the primacy of duty in communitarian thought or questioning its implication on the individual and agency (see Adeate 2022; Chemhuru 2018; Chimakonam 2018; Chimakonam and Awugosi 2020; Gyekye 1997; Ikuenobe 2018a, 2018b; Matolino 2018a, 2018b; Menkiti 1984, 2004; Molefe 2018a, 2018b; Oelofsen 2018; Wiredu 1995).

My understanding of the individual flows from a non-moral conception of selfhood. This is how best to make sense of the significance of community and the value of communal orientation that Mbiti and other communitarian theorists draw attention to. While we can make sense of the values the community presents to us, the account of the individual in Afro-communitarianism needs to be clearer. It needs to present itself beyond what is given by the community. Matolino offers a model of thinking about the individual not encumbered by the dictates of the community in what he refers to as limited communitarianism, where he emphasises the constitutive features of the self, such as *okra*, the *sunsum* and the *nipadua*, among others, as an essential reference to defining personhood. He uses these constitutive features to capture the metaphysical aspect of self, which he prioritises over the communitarian aspect (Matolino 2014; 2018a). Personhood is about the individual—the ideal individual—and what should be dominant for such an ideal should emanate from the individual, not the community. However, this does not necessarily imply, as Matolino captures, features common to all individuals, such as *okra*, the *sunsum* and the *nipadua*. Although these features could form part of it, it is not restricted to them.

2 Many of the criticisms against the idea of personhood in the Afro-communitarian thought, however, are not directed to Mbiti. However, most, if not all critics of Menkiti's idea of personhood take it to be the case that Mbiti's idea of personhood suffers the same fate as Menkiti's because of Mbiti's influence on Menkiti. However, many of the issues that attract attention in Menkiti's idea of personhood are not clearly expressive in Mbiti's description of the self in African thought.

Individuals can ground their understanding of personhood on their principles of self-respect, where such a principle acknowledges the universal notion of dignity—being human.³ It is not out of place to agree that individuals can self-affirm their personhood. Suppose an individual sees themselves as a person; in that case, they must acknowledge a certain moral rectitude exhibited to profiting their life goals and self-development and not only an acquisition of some communal values responsible for servicing the continued tradition of a community.

Since personhood is understood solely as a defining feature of the individual, I support the claims that other modes of attaining personhood, with serious reference to the self, should be considered. Outside the fact that the community-moral-centred conception of personhood misinterprets the nature of the “I” and underestimates the reality of uniqueness and difference in communal social arrangements, community-moral-centred personhood will not acknowledge a plural conception of personhood and an idea of personhood generated on individual internal principles. In a community where the moral theory of personhood is to be taken seriously as the principles and system of social order on which the community is grounded, individuals whose mode of personhood is not community-centred suffer an inability to express their selfhood.

An idea of personhood grounded on an individual’s principles of self-respect (and not communitarian stratified dignity gained from that individual’s fulfilment of approved obligations to the community) will help resolve the tensions of dominance between community and the individual, especially those around individual rights and freedom (see also Matolino 2014; 2018a). In a community where basic respect among members of the community is accorded not based on attaining personhood but on being human, self-expression will not be constrained. It is this framework of personhood or standard of defining self that will deal with the suspicion that the community only serves the interests of members who attained personhood through its standards. The community that fits into the scheme of a modern, multicultural order, must do everything possible to have norms, and such a community maintains a social order that allows for plural conceptions of things, beings, and reality that promote the flourishing and well-being of

3 Self-respect is, tautologically, the respect individuals accord themselves without needing the opinions of others (Margalit 1996, 14). An individual sets the standard for respect using their principles and values. Self-respect demonstrates the degree of an individual’s attention on the self. It is a self-appreciation that does not appeal to external justification, such as the affirmation from the community or groups to which such an individual belongs. This description of self-respect, emphasising personal standards, is what Bird (2008, 5) refers to as “standards self-respect.” However, Margalit stresses that “self-respect, although based on one’s human worth in one’s own eyes, implicitly assumes the need for other respectful human beings” (Margalit 1996, 126). Besides the fact that self-respect is generated internally, it also depends on others’ attitudes towards us. This affirms why the social order that guides social relations and arrangement must recognise the plurality of the principles of self-respect. Whatever good the society must hold, it must be one that promotes individual self-attentiveness necessary for the sustenance of self-respect.

all its members. It must acknowledge individual humans and treat the “I” as simply human rather than a reduction to moral personhood.

Selfhood and the making of the different “I” in Mbiti’s axiom do not hold a unilateral conception. It only suggests the coming together of diverse individuals united in their responsibility to one another. The principle Mbiti expresses with his axiom, abhors focusing on the survival of the self and the consequent competition that comes with an individual pursuant of personal survival. Instead, it emphasises collective survival and the role of members of the community towards that actualisation. This form of living gives a sense of how the economic life of traditional African societies is organised. It is a socio-economic philosophy substantiated in Mbiti’s principle of existence in African thought, “I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am” (Mbiti 1970, 141). The survival of the community and its advancement rests on the degree of cooperation and the joint action of its members.

Outside the reality of joint action that the idea of community promotes, the emphasis on duty is also dominant. The growth and the sustenance of the community are owed to the commitment to duty every being (with capacity for duty) has and the commitment towards utilising their capacity. The Afro-communitarian version of duty ethics emphasises the knowing that the sustenance of the society is subject to the non-withdrawal of the capacity and obligation to the community as a collective project. Also, the sustenance of the community reciprocates the good wishes and obligations the living dead have towards the living and the unborn generation. The living owes the unborn the preservation of community and values. This is in addition to clean energy and the environment, and economic insurance, among others, that the living owes to the unborn and infants. It is the position of this article that modern African societies may borrow from the notion of seeing society as an entity defined by a web of obligations for its constituting beings.

The community orientation instils a sense of responsibility in Earth’s inhabitants. If the living, the beneficiaries of the obligations and labour of their ancestors, know that what forms part of their life is the obligation they have to the future generation, their perception of managing present existential, social and environmental challenges will be improved. The benefit of properly managing Earth and its social space is to bequeath a better one for the coming generation.

However, one may argue that the duty to the unborn gives a sense that the identities of the unborn are formed by the living community prior to their union with the living members. They are born into a framework that sets the boundaries for their choices in different existential situations. This may appear as withdrawing the capacity for self-actualisation if the world they intend to inhabit has already designed the pattern of their life journey. However problematic this may appear, if the living has an idea of the good of the unborn, a morally better world may be handed over to the unborn through their commitment to a better life. We can see also that the existence of the living is also

influenced by the living dead, who, before their departure, were the preservers of the community and the custodians of its values and norms. The living dead continue to hold certain levels of influence on the living. This influence is captured in the ways the living consult the ancestors on issues that appear complex. This gives an understanding of how beings and individuals in Afro-communitarian thought have a sense of duty towards other beings. This indicates a form of social harmony and a sense of collective responsibility. Nonetheless, it is important to consider that our most important obligation is to the narrow conception of the “we” that are physical beings—the living individuals in the community. It is in this light that we make sense of our current existence. Socio-political questions on governance and politics can be unravelled from our understanding of the significance of the “we” in the Mbitian political thought.

My reconstruction of the “I” in Mbiti’s axiom envisages some criticism, especially regarding the nature of personhood. One may argue that since the communitarian view of personhood is a moral theory of persons, a theory that holds a framework for producing moral beings mainly through its ethics of social relations, it contributes to developing a moral/good society. However, it is essential to know that for individuals to see themselves as “other” and being treated as such, is an unavoidable outcome of the Afro-communitarian idea of personhood. While moral and cultural principles are necessary for social development, they must be both for the reception and the flourishing of all. To be a person is to translate the community’s moral values as principles that guide the self. As such, a person is a moral or cultural conformist. The moral norms of personhood in Afro-communitarian thought do not hold a principle of dignity that affirms the claims of a meaningful existence for non-conforming individuals, what it refers to as non-persons. The treatment of non-conforming individuals by the community is the beginning of the consciousness of “self” and “other.” Social alienation is imminent at the moment social interaction is truncated because of a supposed disregard for the community’s principles of personhood by some individuals. This social alienation or non-belongingness experienced by the affected individuals could influence their self-respect, especially in a society that primes social interactions.

The “I” in Mbiti’s axiom could be interpreted as not being involved in the dichotomy between persons and non-persons. Mbiti’s axiom underscores the importance of inclusivity in that the “I” sees itself as sharing communion with the “we.” It emphasises the importance of continued social interaction. Sharing this interdependency and pursuing the demand of seeking the welfare of the collective are not possible if the “I” is classified into categories that promote polarisation. A critical interpretation of the “I” will restrict undue classifications of it. The worth of the community and its relevance for social ordering will not be known if it is tied to the prescription of the idealness of the individual, thereby obstructing individual interest and agency. If the goal of the community is redirected towards strengthening human coexistence through integration rather than identity formation, the reception of values and norms of communal togetherness and relationship will be enhanced.

Conclusion

In this article, I have elucidated the influence of Mbiti and the value of theorising community in African political philosophy through a critical discussion on the non-dominance relation that could exist between the individual and community in Mbiti's thought. I did this through a reinterpretation and re-evaluation of Mbiti's axiom. This reinterpretation is needed to ensure fair engagement with Mbiti's contribution to political philosophy and to identify a theory of community beyond a troubled theory of persons in Mbiti's collectivist moral and political philosophy. I established that while Mbiti's famous axiom gives the link to understanding his intention, a deeper exploration of the axiom does not give an understanding of a community that dominates the individual. Using the "we" in Mbiti's axiom, I draw out the value of the community. I give a concise description of the nature of community in Mbiti's thought, and how thinking about the ideals of the community can be harnessed and utilised in modern social and political structures. I have shown that the idea of community is valuable in so far that it instils responsibility to the collective and helps us appreciate and advance the well-being of others, and not in the conceptions of selfhood, which result in the suspicion of dominance. I use the "I" to resolve the tension between the community and the individual in Afro-communitarianism. I have identified the "I" as strictly a description of the individual human not encumbered with the standard of definition by the community. I have shown how redefining personhood is critical to a non-dominance and non-tensioned relationship between the community and the individual. It is in defining selfhood as that which is granted through individuals' principles of self-respect (while setting up values that involve other people) that the community ceases to hold on to its dominance in the relationship between the self and community. This understanding of selfhood is essential to the reception of the community, its ideals and orientations in contemporary African societies.

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