What Africa Can Contribute to the World
Thaddeus Metz

Abstract: This chapter expounds relational values characteristic of indigenous Africa and considers how they might usefully be adopted when contemporary societies interact with each other. Specifically, it notes respects in which genuinely human or communal relationship has been missing in the contexts of globalization and international relations, and suggests what a greater appreciation of this good by the rest of the world would mean for them.

Key words: African morality • Communion • Globalization • Harmony • International Relations • Progress • Relationality • War

Mots-clés: Moralité africaine • Relation communautaire • Mondialisation • Harmonie • Relations internationales • Progrès • Valeurs relationnelles • Guerre

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1.   Introduction: Seeking an Outward Africa

Africa has not been particularly outward over the past several centuries, by which I mean that a contributory relationship from Africa to other societies has not been salient. This has been so in two major respects.

First, nearly every African country was subjected to colonialism and other forms of oppression for a few centuries. Africa was used, indeed exploited, mostly for its resources and labour. Being forced to give up material goods—such as minerals under the ground and workers above it—for the sake of other societies' ways of life differs from electing to share goods, perhaps cultural ones, with them that they have come to appreciate. Indeed, in the colonial era African cultures were at best ignored, and at worst denigrated and snuffed out.

Second, since independence from colonialism, African societies, particularly those south of the Sahara desert, have tended to look inward, in the sense of wanting to recover what had been lost, to repair the wrongful harms that had been done, to distance themselves from any foreign influences (business or otherwise), and to seek 'African solutions for African problems'. In addition, former colonial powers and probably most other countries have viewed Africa as a place that must be helped, that is in need of 'development' in particular. Both approaches are understandable, and some core elements of them are not unreasonable. However, they are both ultimately one-sided; what they lack is a view of Africa as a source of insight for the rest of the world, as able to 'contribute meaningfully to global knowledge and civilisation' (Makgoba, 1998: 48).

This sort of outward orientation is important for Africa to cultivate. For one, making visible contributions towards humanity's progress would be a natural source of esteem for the African psyche. For another, doing so would be meaningful for African peoples. It appears that in all long-standing large-scale societies, meaning in life is thought to come particularly from helping others. Although great meaning might come from helping those

related to you in some way (say, in the form of 'Family first'), for most peoples substantial meaning would also be conferred by helping a wide array of others regardless of their heritage or location. In addition, in the case of Africa a kind of meaningful redemption would arguably come from healing the wounds of colonialism and then reaching out to help others (perhaps by preventing or healing similar kinds of harms); such a project would be a collective analogue of an individual making something good come from the bad earlier in her life.

What, then, does Africa have to offer the world, besides its material goods? South African Black Consciousness intellectual Steve Biko has answered this way: 'We believe that in the long run the special contribution to the world by Africa will be in this field of human relationship. The great powers of the world may have done wonders in giving the world an industrial and military look, but the great gift still has to come from Africa—giving the world a more human face' (1971: 51). Such a view has been voiced by Africanists for more than 100 years (for examples, see du Bois, 1897, 1924; Busia, 1962: 108; Mutwa, 1964: 552, 691; Kaunda, 1967: 22; Iroegbu, 2007: 151).

Sometimes their phrasings take the form of a prediction, and sometimes they seem to express an essentialism, deeming certain features to be inherent to Africans. However, these questionable points should not obscure what is a plausible and powerful claim, namely, that certain relational values that are characteristic of (not essential to) African societies would be (not necessarily will be) beneficial for other societies to accept, or at least to respect as a potentially sound approach to how to live.

This chapter expounds indigenous Afro-relational values and then considers how they might usefully be adopted when contemporary societies interact with each other. Specifically, the chapter notes respects in which genuinely human or communal relationship has been missing in the two contexts of globalization and international relations, and suggests what a

greater appreciation of this good by the rest of the world would mean for them.

In focusing on relational values and their implications for interaction across the globe, this chapter does not mean to suggest that this is Africa's only contribution to make. Just as Africa has a gift to give when it comes to what some philosophers would abbreviate as 'the good' (morality, relationship), so it has additional gifts, still to be substantially bestowed, in the realms of 'the true' (knowledge, wisdom) and 'the beautiful' (the arts, creativity). These latter forms of contribution merit exploration, but they are not addressed in this chapter.

2.   African Relational Values[1]

This section presents a brief philosophical reconstruction of one major strand of moral thought salient amongst indigenous African peoples. It is not intended to mirror the belief systems of any particular people or group of them, but is rather a theoretical construction informed by perspectives commonly held by traditional black societies. Furthermore, these perspectives are meant to be neither essential to, nor restricted to, nor solely representative of African ethical views, and are instead put forth as having been particularly prominent over a wide array of space and time, particularly in the sub-Saharan region.

As is well known by African scholars, indigenous norms are often captured by maxims such as 'A person is a person through other persons' and 'I am because we are' (for just two examples, see Mbiti, 1990: 106, 113; Mandela, 2013: 227). Explaining what these expressions mean for most sub-Saharans will be a useful way to lay out relatively uncontested facets of relational values salient amongst traditional African peoples.

The above maxims have both descriptive and prescriptive elements that are intertwined in much traditional African thinking (on which see, e.g.,

[1] Much of this section borrows from Metz (2017a: 444-446).

Wiredu, 1992). When it comes to describing human nature and more generally the way the world is, 'A person is a person through other persons' and 'I am because we are' are meant to indicate that one's existence and identity as an individual person necessarily depend on others. Roughly speaking, one is essentially a person in relationship with other persons, such as members of a clan.

This chapter, however, focuses strictly on evaluative and normative connotations of these sayings, of which the central one is that an individual's foremost aim in life should be to become a *real* person. Personhood is often thought to come in degrees, where the more of a person one is, the better. For example, among Nguni speakers such as Zulus, Ndebeles and Xhosas in southern Africa, one's highest-order goal should be to exhibit *ubuntu*, literally humanness. One should strive to become a true human being or to live a genuinely human way of life. Such a perspective, in fact, is characteristic of indigenous sub-Saharans, as per a useful survey of a variety of African peoples' conceptions of humanness: 'In Africa, to be a human being is a project to be fulfilled by each individual. Being a human being is an ongoing process. Birth alone does not define humanity. One has to "become" a real *Muntu*. One becomes more fully human through one's "way of life," by behaving more ethically' (Nkulu-N'Sengha, 2009: 144; see also Menkiti, 2004).

If an individual failed to live morally, then traditional Africans would typically say of him that he is a 'zero-person' (Nkulu-N'Sengha, 2009: 144) or that he is 'not a person,' in the way one might say that a jalopy is not a 'not a *real* car' (Gaie, 2007: 33). And in more extreme cases of wrongdoing or wickedness they would say that 'he is an animal' (Letseka, 2000: 186).

Such labels are not meant literally, to the effect that an individual is no longer a human being in the biological sense and so lacking a full moral status. Instead of suggesting that an individual is not entitled to moral treatment from others, the terms are meant to indicate that the individual has

failed to develop the valuable facets of his human nature, i.e., as one capable of moral excellence, and is instead living in a base manner, akin to a lower order of the world such as the animal kingdom (Gyekye, 2010).

Now, one is to live humanly or become a real person 'through other persons'. In the first instance, this means that one exhibits other-regarding virtues such as 'he is generous', 'he is peaceful', 'he is humble,' 'he has respect for others' (Gyekye, 2010) and he is 'generous, hospitable, friendly, caring and compassionate' (Tutu, 1999: 34). A prominent suggestion about what all these and other virtues prominent in the African tradition have in common is that they are ways of communing with other persons or participating in harmonious relationships with them. To begin to understand what communion or harmony fundamentally amounts to, in terms of a philosophical ideal, consider these remarks from some African theorists.

The Nigerian philosopher Segun Gbadegesin says that for traditional Yoruba morality, 'Every member is expected to consider him/herself an integral part of the whole and to play an appropriate role towards achieving the good of all' (1991: 65).

Probably the most influential African political philosopher in the past 20 years, the Ghanaian Kwame Gyekye says, 'A harmonious cooperative social life requires that individuals demonstrate sensitivity to the needs and interests of others....Communitarian moral theory....advocates a life lived in harmony and cooperation with others, a life of mutual consideration and aid and of interdependence, a life in which one shares in the fate of the other....' (1997: 72, 76).

South African academic psychologist Nhlanhla Mkhize says, 'A sense of community exists if people are mutually responsive to one another's needs….(O)ne attains the complements associated with full or mature selfhood through participation in a community of similarly constituted selves….To be is to belong and to participate' (2008: 39, 40).

Finally, the Kenyan historian of philosophy Dismas Masolo

highlights what he calls the African values of 'living a life of mutual concern for the welfare of others, such as in a cooperative creation and distribution of wealth. … Feeling integrated with as well as willing to integrate others into a web of relations free of friction and conflict' (2010: 240).

These and construals from many other parts of Africa about what it is to live harmoniously or to commune with others suggest two recurrent themes (on which see Metz, 2017b). On the one hand, there is a relationship of *identity*, a matter of considering oneself part of the whole, sharing in the fate of others, belonging and participating, and integrating. On the other hand, there is reference to a relationship of *solidarity*, viz., being committed to the good of others, being sensitive to others' interests, responding to others' needs, and being concerned for the welfare of others.

The combination of the relationships of identity and solidarity, or, equivalently, of sharing way of life with others and caring for their quality of life, is basically what English speakers mean by 'friendliness' or even 'love' in a broad sense. Hence, one can sum up one major swathe of traditional African thought about how to live this way: one's basic aim should be to become a real person, which one can do (only or mainly) by prizing communal, harmonious or friendly relationships. This philosophical analysis of ideas recurrently associated with African morality makes sense of Desmond Tutu's terse remarks of sub-Saharan values: 'We say, "a person is a person through other people". It is not "I think therefore I am". It says rather: "I am human because I belong." I participate, I share….Harmony, friendliness, community are great goods. Social harmony is for us the *summum bonum*—the greatest good' (1999: 35).

These ideas are fairly uncontroversial when it comes to a large tract of African ethical thought. Living communally or harmoniously is central to exhibiting human excellence particularly in the sub-Saharan tradition (although, again, this chapter makes no claim that it is the sole ground of all moral judgments in it). Note that this ethic makes good sense of several

salient practices amongst indigenous African peoples that are intuitively appealing, including (amongst other things2) the practices of: collective harvesting and building, not leaving individuals to fend for themselves; resolving political disputes by giving all affected a voice and seeking consensus amongst at least popularly appointed elders; enjoying an extended family, i.e., large networks of intimate relations and those who care for children; distributing wealth as to avoid great inequalities that would undermine meeting people's needs and risk fostering attitudes of envy and distance; and seeking reconciliation upon wrongdoing.

However, there are some contestations to note. For example, African thinkers differ when it comes to the question of precisely with whom or what one is to harmonize or commune. Traditionally speaking, in order to develop personhood, it is clear that one must first and foremost commune with family members (e.g., Appiah, 1998), where that is often considered in an extended sense, one that includes the 'living-dead' such as ancestors residing in an invisible realm on earth (e.g., Setiloane, 1976; Magesa, 1997; Murove, 2007). Some, more secularly inclined people these days maintain that prizing harmonious relationships with other human beings, and perhaps with animals and other parts of nature, would be sufficient to live well.

Furthermore, there is disagreement amongst theorists whose views are informed by traditional African cultures about the ultimate reason to enter into communion with others. Above, Tutu suggests that doing so is a non-derivative and unsurpassable good. The Ugandan-based scholar of African religions, Peter Kasenene, seems to make a similar suggestion when he says that 'in African societies, immorality is the word or deed which undermines fellowship' (1998: 21). In contrast, others maintain that the value of

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2 For these and other respects in which an ethic of communion grounds recurrent ways of life amongst traditional sub-Saharan peoples, see Metz (2017b).

communion or harmony, even if quintessentially African, is merely instrumental, to be sought solely as a reliable means either to enhancing the vitality of one's society (Bujo, 1997; Magesa, 1997) or to realizing the common good (Gyekye, 1997, 2010).

Regardless of whether communion is to be pursued as an end in itself or as an essential means to a value that is more basic, it is central to one large strand of indigenous African thought about values. More specifically, a neat philosophical interpretation of at least the sub-Saharan moral tradition is that one should live in a way that prizes communal relationships with others, or that treats others as special in virtue of their relational ability to exhibit identity and solidarity with others. Such an approach to how to live differs from other long-standing moral traditions such as Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam and Western liberal-individualism. The rest of this chapter unpacks the Afro-communal principle in the context of two major issues that concern Africa's place in the world and more generally how societies should interact with each other in the 21st century.

3.   Tempering Globalization with Communion

Globalization is a largely economic and cultural phenomenon that has arisen in the past 30 or 40 years. After explaining briefly what it involves, this chapter indicates what the value of communion entails for it. It argues that while some facets of globalization are welcome in the light of a prescription to live communally, others are not, should be changed and, where necessary, must be actively rebutted.

In general, globalization consists of greater integration of various parts of the world, particularly when it comes to economics. The world has become more globalized, the more that: materials from one part of it have been transported to another; corporations based in one country have opened outlets in many others; people born in one country have relocated to another for purposes of work or education; products and services sold in one region have come to be consumed in many others; barriers to markets have been

lowered; and the currencies of different countries have themselves been subjected to global trade.

In the wake of these business-oriented forms of globalization have arisen some more culturally-oriented ones. The latter include: information that was generated in one region becoming readily available (say, via the internet) in another; music and other art forms originating in one locale being enjoyed or appreciated around the world; people from one culture traveling to another, different one either to learn or to enjoy a holiday; and English becoming increasingly used in countries where it is not a first language.

The above description of globalization is largely neutral, in the sense of not using evaluative terminology to characterize it. However, implicit in the processes described are certain effects on people that admit of moral evaluation. Consider, now, the extent to which globalization is or is not consistent with African relational values as spelled out in the previous section.

Taking the value of communion for granted, globalization of *some* kind is prima facie desirable. If what makes people special is their ability to relate, then there is some moral reason for them to do so, i.e., to foster cohesion between each other. A policy of isolation or self-reliance could be temporarily justified as a defensive response to aggression or other forms of subordination, but is not the ideal. Instead, an ethic of communion prescribes interdependence and outreach, or at least welcoming with hospitality those who seek to engage on friendly terms. 'We are different so that we can know our need of one another, for no one is ultimately self-sufficient. A completely self-sufficient person would be sub-human' (Tutu, 1999: 214).

Furthermore, if one part of the world is enjoying certain goods, there is on the face of it reason for them to be shared with the rest of the world insofar as they would be of real benefit to it. The spread of smart mobile phones and internet access, for example, were facilitated by a world market,

and have arguably been good on the whole for a wide variety of different peoples and cultures.

However, the sort of economic and cultural integration that has taken place across the globe has unfortunately undermined communion in several serious ways. First, the rich have become astonishingly richer, to the point where it has recently been reported that just eight people own as much wealth as the bottom half of the world's population (Mullany, 2017). Although it is probably inaccurate to say that the poor have become poorer from globalization (particularly in the light of China's massive economic growth), it is likely the case that the poor are worse off than they have to be. Communing with people would mean distributing wealth in ways that meet their needs; to amass riches that one does not need in the face of several hundreds of millions of people who suffer from hunger, illness, unemployment and the like is to flout the value of communion.

Of course, some rich individuals have given up major portions of their wealth. However, a global economic system that were communal would be such that they would not be able to collect tens of billions of dollars in the first place. Or, if that could not be prevented without threatening other significant ways to meet others' needs, then at least others should not have to rely on the voluntary inclinations of the rich in order to have their needs met (including their own need to have something to share with others). A global taxation system of some kind appears essential to treat people as having a dignity in virtue of their ability to be communed with and to commune.

The 'free trade' dimension of globalization, at least as practiced so far, also has undermined communion. It is of course degrading for African countries to be told to open up their agricultural markets when European countries and the United States (notoriously) employ protectionist measures. However, note that a more just global order would require more than merely tit-for-tat, that is, a similar lowering of trade barriers. Instead, where Western farmers are by and large well off and African farmers are not, African

governments should be allowed to protect their farmers and Western governments should not (on which see Moellendorf, 2009).

Another unwelcome effect of 'free trade' is the impact it can have on relationships within a country or region. Rather than export goods to the global market, African traders, or at least those who prize communion, would often prefer to make goods that would benefit their compatriots. There is something prima facie wrong with a situation, evidently such as in Togo, 'where in a country with coffee crops it is impossible to drink local coffee (there is only imported instant one)' (Lubieniecka, 2013: 11-12). Although all human persons matter insofar as they are by nature capable of communion, there is extra reason to serve those with whom one has actually communed. Therefore, a country that produces raw coffee beans but lacks the technological means to process them should go out of its way to acquire them, and other countries should enable it to do so. That would be a more fitting kind of aid than merely assisting farmers in 'developing' societies to compete on the world market.[3]

Another, more attractive kind of 'development' would be one that did not automatically reproduce the banking system that is prominent in the West. As many of those who have studied traditional African economies have pointed out, the profit motive has often conflicted with the prestige motive, viz., the intention to give without immediate expectation of net gain or even equivalent return (e.g., Murove, 2009). In contrast to a private, profit-oriented banking model, it would be natural for those inspired by indigenous African values to pool their resources and then loan them out either without seeking interest or at least on a profit-sharing basis for the many members of the

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[3] This example, the next one and some others not mentioned here are in Metz (2017c).

scheme.4 Where globalization tends to standardize Western business practices, and typical development schemes seek to support them, Africa could instead create ones that are more communal in nature and inspire similar initiatives around the world.

For a final example of how globalization has been discordant, consider ways in which cultural homogenization, and specifically Westernization, are incompatible with communion and could be mitigated. Where people have by and large freely shared a way of life for a long while and it has become central to their self-conceptions, respect requires doing what one can to avoid undermining it. Too much English and other forms of standardized art and architecture do threaten people as members of cultural groups.

Why is it that an African airport plays Anglo-American music, when it could feature local artists and enable visitors to purchase their recordings? Why is the Radisson hotel in a given African city pretty much indistinguishable from what one would encounter in North America, when it instead could have employed local architects and designers to impart African aesthetics, meanings and forms of engagement? Why does an African public television broadcaster pay for 'B' movies from Hollywood, when it could find creative and inexpensive ways to produce local content, including teaching young people and the elderly how to conduct interviews and create short films? These examples from an African context are hardly unique to it; just consider the range of cities 'colonized' by McDonald's and Starbucks, for one.

The above suggestions about how globalization should be countered so as to protect and foster communion are unlikely to be viewed favourably by multinational corporations and the countries that profit from them. This

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4 See discussions of South African *stokvels* in Louw (2001: 24-25), and of Senegalese *tontine* in Berg (2007: 552).

means that African societies must be strategic and tenacious in the ways they negotiate the terms of economic engagement. A given sub-Saharan country is unlikely to be able to stand up effectively on its own. However, regional blocs are much more likely to be in a position to do so. Ideally, the African Union would develop standards for doing business that would apply to all members. That way, a given corporation could not play African countries off against each other. A similar approach could be taken by, say, Latin America.

Note that these suggestions are not a call for isolation from the world market, let alone from the rest of the world more generally. Self-reliance is unlikely to be effective in a world that is already so closely integrated, and, in any event, recall that interdependence rather than independence is the moral ideal from the perspective of communion. Instead, the recommendations are to find ways of interacting with other countries in ways that enable communion both with them and within one's own country.

4.   Towards More Communal International Relations

This section turns from economic and cultural issues as affected by globalization and towards politics on the world stage. What could Africa teach the world about how organizations with political power such as states ought to relate to one another?

As briefly mentioned above, it is likely that the value of communion was responsible for the sort of inclusive and evenhanded decision-making that was common at the domestic level in traditional African societies (on which see, e.g., Bujo, 1997: 161-166; Gyekye, 1997: 124-140; Wiredu, 2000). For example, it was routine for policy to be determined not unilaterally by a king, but rather by a group of elders who had been popularly appointed and who sought to resolve conflicts in a way that was to the benefit of everyone. Similarly, many indigenous sub-Saharan peoples would to seek to resolve conflicts of interest by hearing the views of any adult member of the community and talking until consensus amongst them was achieved. Relational values of identity and solidarity makes good sense of these

practices. Widespread consultation and unanimous agreement would be particularly likely to instantiate a sense of togetherness and coordination as well as to result in the adoption of policies that would be good for everyone's sake, not slanted in favour of either a majority or a minority.

How might international relations be informed by a basic principle of prizing communion and the consensus-oriented approaches to decision-making that it supports? One possibility would to seek consensus or at least a super-majority about key issues facing the United Nations, which, as is well known, currently tends to operate according to power blocs. Parties in search of unanimous agreements could be urged to point out non-negotiables and to offer constructive solutions in the light of the various necessary conditions mentioned. This negotiation technique was recently borrowed from indigenous southern African peoples in order to resolve climate change disputes amongst nearly 200 countries in Paris (Rathi, 2015), and it merits extension to other global political contexts.

Perhaps consensus-seeking should also be required within a country before it makes a major shift in the way it relates to another one, such as initiating a war against it (which the philosopher Uchenna Okeja is exploring in as yet unpublished work). Instead of a small group of executive branch elites deciding whether to attack another state or people, perhaps the elected representatives of those who will have to fight in the war and otherwise suffer its consequences should be Constitutionally required to come to a unanimous agreement about whether to go to war. The suggestion is not that consensus would be sufficient to justify a military engagement or some other major change in policy with regard to another country, for all those who have agreed to a certain decision might have made a mistake. Instead, the proposal is that a necessary condition for being justified in starting a war or the like would be obtaining agreement from all those representing the people who would have to bear its cost.

For a third and final example of how a principle of prizing communion might usefully guide global actors' political orientation towards each other, consider that Africa has already given a lesson to the world about how to respond to large-scale conflicts. Instead of seeking retribution in the form of trials and penalties fitting the crimes, or deterrence in the form retaliation, those who had exhibited enmity towards each other could strive for reconciliation or what is these days sometimes called 'restorative justice'.

As alluded to above, at the domestic level a characteristic indigenous African approach to wrongdoing has been to seek to restore (or at least to create) harmonious relationships (e.g., Aja, 1997; Idowu, 2006). It is no accident that reconciliation has been the key theme in the ways that Zimbabwe, South Africa, Sierra Leone and Rwanda have dealt with gross human rights violations and other civil strife. Roughly speaking, sub-Saharan ideals of communion have grounded an approach to criminal justice according to which those who have been extremely unjust ought to be given a chance to apologize, to make amends by revealing the truth about their misdeeds and offering restitution for them, to become morally reformed (which could be achieved by means of punishment), and then to be reintegrated into society. This approach to conflict resolution has been particularly explored by South African theorists, activists and lawyers in respect of that country's influential Truth and Reconciliation Commission (e.g., Tutu, 1999; Louw, 2006; Krog, 2008).

Although such commissions have so far mainly been employed in response to intranational conflict such as civil wars, there is no reason not to extend them to bitter and long-lasting international conflicts. How might reconciliation be achieved amongst, say, the Israelis and Palestinians, the Sunnis and Shias, or the Indians and Pakistanis? It is Africa that is the natural one to pose such a question.

5.   Conclusion

For the two topics of globalization and international relations, this chapter has noted respects in which indigenous African communal values have been missing in the 21st century and how a greater appreciation of them would be intuitively desirable. It has sought to avoid utopianism or otherwise to make suggestions that are impractical, while also trying to avoid prescriptions that are both obvious and easily done. Instead, it has sought something in between these extremes, offering recommendations about how societies should relate to one another so as to exhibit identity and solidarity that have not been salient in global debate and would take some effort, but that are also realistic. May this chapter spur the reader to come up with more suggestions of this sort, if not to help realize them in practice.

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