

# Moderate communitarianism and the prospect of an African political philosophy of needs

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The social, cultural and economic history of Africa informs the various political narratives on the continent. Among these narratives birthing various intellectual discourses are the questions of personhood and communitarianism, socialism, independence, decolonisation and ubuntu. Implicit in these discourses, yet less theorised, is an African political philosophy of needs. By an African political philosophy of needs, I refer to a political philosophy that theorises about the social, economic and political realities in Africa, especially as they pertain to the needs that these realities engender. This article seeks to formulate a compelling, positive African political philosophy of needs. It does this by engaging Gyekye's "moderate communitarianism". It explores the various African political philosophical conceptions, thereby showing the need to theorise an African philosophy of needs adequately. The significance of this article is to address how various conditions, namely weak states (as a result of colonialism and postcolonial corruption), the complex history of leaders and massive underdevelopment of countries' manufacturing capabilities in Africa are unable to respond to people's needs, and how African political preoccupations, although important, have had deleterious effects on the political philosophy of needs. I shall argue on the capacity of African states to respond adequately to, and become responsible for, their citizens' needs.

## Introduction

African political philosophies have made great progress in recent years, opening up research horizons on African culture, communitarianism, migration, politics, living conditions, democracy, religion, violence, gender and ethics, among others (Mbiti 1969; Hountondji 2002; Sanni 2016; Oyeronke 2016). However, few African political positions, like Kwame Gyekye's (1995), have considered the philosophy of needs as an important intellectual category – understood as a significant dimension of African politics. An African political philosophy of needs is important because weak states are unable to respond to people's needs. African political philosophers who do engage the question of needs have, often inadvertently, created a language – an intellectual and conceptual framework – that is structured in such a way as to negate the possibility of individual autonomy as central in addressing the problem of needs in Africa. They address individual autonomy from a kind of communitarian perspective in ways that undermine the conceptual and institutional means for individuals to articulate their needs. Hence, the significance of this article is to address how various conditions, namely weak states (as a result of colonialism and postcolonial corruption), the complex history of leaders and massive underdevelopment of countries' manufacturing capabilities in Africa are unable to respond to people's needs, and how African political preoccupations, although important, have had deleterious effects on the political philosophy of needs. I shall argue for the capacity of African states to adequately respond to their citizens' needs. The importance of the philosophy of needs for the study of African politics testifies not only to the lack of an adequate conception of an African political philosophy of needs, but to common socio-economic circumstances and conditions in Africa that do not deal with the question of needs. With few exceptions including the recent

edited book, *Towards an African Political Philosophy of Needs*, edited by Motsamai Molefe and Christopher Allsobrook (2021), there are no relevant studies in an African political philosophy of needs.

However, the book does not adequately engage with the role of accountability in the theorisation of an African political philosophy of needs. The editors, Molefe and Allsobrook (2021, 2–6), present three reasons that inform and arguably constitute the content of the book on needs: first, “the centrality of and limitations to Human-Rights-based political theory”; second, “the centrality of communitarian socialism to the philosophical vision of post-independence African political leaders, grounded in satisfaction of basic needs”; and third, “the implicit, underacknowledged foundational role attributed to needs in the thinking of pioneers of formalised African philosophy”. Therefore, this article not only fills a significant gap in the African political philosophy scholarship, but it innovates in the field of African philosophy by showing how the concept of needs can function as an African philosophical framework through which complex African politics and accountability can be debated.

I am concerned with the topic as it pertains to non-ideal theory as opposed to ideal theory. On the one hand, ideal theory, first of all, “assumes strict compliance and works out the principles that characterize a well-ordered society under favourable circumstances” (Rawls 1971, 245). Then, “a conception of a just society that we are to achieve if we can” is prescribed (Rawls 1971, 246). Finally, it posits that we are to examine our existing institutional structures in accordance with the prescribed conception (Rawls 1971). On the other hand, non-ideal theory is aimed at realising the conception of a just society in the ideal theory. Hence, it seeks to explore how this long-term goal might be realised, or gradually achieved. It looks for courses of action that are morally permissible and politically possible as well as likely to be effective (Rawls 1999). The position here is that non-ideal theory assumes that ideal theory is already present. While the ideal theory is informed by present realities, non-ideal theory has no frame of reference (Rawls 1999). Ideal theory is often informed by a realistic utopia. This is because it accommodates real human experiences, the world as it is and institutions as they are structured. As such, ideal theory is practicable and can inform the moral framework of a society. In Rawls’ words, “the ideal theory is realistic because – it could and may exist. I say it is also utopian and highly desirable because it joins reasonableness and justice with conditions enabling citizens to realize their fundamental interests” (Rawls 1999, 7). The significance of non-ideal theory is that it projects an ideal state that can inform how we examine African societies in our desire for a just society.

In what follows, I shall proceed in four steps, each focused on a specific objective. First, I will identify the common circumstances and conditions, namely weak states, the complex history of leaders and massive underdevelopment of countries’ manufacturing capabilities in Africa that typically disengage the question of needs. Secondly, I will present instances where African theoretical frameworks have attempted to address the philosophy of needs. Thirdly, I will show how previous attempts are unsatisfactory in their account of an African politics as it pertains to needs. Fourthly, I will build a practically applicable philosophy of needs, influenced by Gyekye’s “moderate communitarianism”, that would enable autonomy, creativity and responsibility in people’s articulation of their needs.

### **African politics and weak states**

Postcolonial African societies, marked by independence and leaders’ invitation of Africans to chart a new path, although aware of the negative effects of colonialism, move towards social, economic and political freedom. Leaders in post-independent Africa, such as Kwame Nkrumah (1964), focused on the emancipation of African people, especially from the ideological impositions of colonialism from which Ghana needed to be freed. There are leaders like Julius Nyerere (1968) of Tanzania and Kenneth Kaunda (2007) of Zambia who formulated theoretical schemes for self-reliance, fostered by familyhood and solidarity. These are responses to the social fragmentation caused by colonialism. The desire for self-reliance was key to the formation of an African society and identity, which was believed to have experienced partial erasure due to colonialism.

Tied to the idea of community and solidarity, and central to Africa independence, was the desire to reclaim the eroded idea of the humanity lost during colonialism. Achille Mbembe identifies three major effects of colonialism on Africa. First, “separation”, which “leads to a loss of familiarity with the self to the point that the subject, estranged, is relegated to an alienated, almost lifeless identity” (Mbembe 2017, 78). Second, “disappropriation” which he argues controlled “juridical and economic procedures...led to material expropriation and dispossession, and, on the other, to a singular experience of subjection characterized by the falsification of oneself by the other” (ibid.). Third, “degradation”, which “plunged the black subject into humiliation, abjection, and nameless suffering. It also incited a process of ‘social death’ characterized by the denial of dignity, dispersion, and the torment of exile” (ibid.). The debased understanding of Africa and Africans was one of the legitimising determinants for colonisation and domination. Wole Soyinka (2012, 19) observes that

[t]he humanism preached by poets and writers, of whom the post-statesman Léopold Sédar Senghor was prime promoter, remains a generous though largely obscured reality. Senghor placed this humanism at the foundation of his conceptual edifice of Negritude – the being of blackness, among other definitions.

The nature of Africans’ identity was an important question after colonialism. This is why political philosophers like Senghor’s state that an understanding of humanism is not built on pure individualism. On the contrary, Senghor sought to insist on the traditional past that put more stress on the “...communion of persons than on their autonomy” (Senghor 1964, 93–94). This is a position that partly informs African socialism and the strict communitarian conception of needs. The idea was that the division institutionalised by colonialism was against the traditional African conception of community, and now it has to be reinstated in different Africa societies. There was an emphasis on the unity of vision and purpose believed to be only achievable through African socialism.

Socialism had an important role in the kind of social, political and economic spaces that post-independent leaders advocated for. In the 1960s, the Action Group Party in Nigeria, led by Chief Obafemi Awolowo, made it clear that education was a necessary tool for the growth of any society. He remarked that, “as far as possible, expenditure on services which tend to the welfare and health and education of the people should be increased at the expense of any expenditure that does not answer to the same test” (Awolowo 1960, 263). The views that emerged from the political positions of these African leaders sought to revitalise the lost identity and diminished self-worth of Africans. Above all, the axiomatic principle of socialism is the “...logic of the primacy of needs to regulate the distribution of goods among human beings. Remember the famous socialist maxim – from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs” (Molefe and Allsobrook 2021, 5). Like most African leaders at the time, Nyerere’s political position is a needs-based understanding of freedom and liberation (Molefe and Allsobrook 2021). These political leaders felt the need to attend to the primary duty of guiding the people towards individual and collective actions that were necessary for the new kind of awareness and emancipation that Africa needed.

There was an emphasis on individual and collective obligation in actualising the goals, and these goals were to guide the people towards a collective economic, social and political freedom, which meant the elimination of the colonial model of politics. Hamilton (2021, 172), observes that African political leaders’ interest in socialism hinges on a critique of the “Western-imposed utilitarian” and “capitalist worldview”. While recognising the significance of this important step toward political freedom away from colonially imposed worldviews, Hamilton insists that the problem lies in African political choices and how they effectively represent and account for the everyday needs of the people. I understand Hamilton’s positions as the need to critically engage the existing sociopolitical realities in Africa in ways that make leaders accountable for their actions and political policies.

The post-1960s struggle for independence reveals that most African countries are still developing. This is not because Africa lacks the necessary resources; it is largely the result of weak or fragile countries, lacking effective governance and with inequalities and weak institutions. As rightly observed by Hamilton (2021, 171), Africa was a political laboratory for the colonialist, and to a significant extent responsible for the conflicting political models on the continent: “the legacies

of colonial domination are multifarious, this is the most pernicious as it legitimizes a structural disconnect between political, philosophical and religious elites and everyday citizens and residents". In conceptualising needs, it is evident that some leaders do not prioritise all the segments of their population and this sometimes results in the formation of revolutionary militias, ethnic groups and extremist religious groups. Countries like Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Cameroon, Cote d'Ivoire, among others, point to the prominence of the reality of weak states in Africa. Post-independence Africa still struggles with the challenge of realising its dreams.

### **Existing African conceptions of needs**

As already highlighted, after independence in Africa in the 1960s, the quest in postcolonial Africa was driven by a humanistic emancipatory foundation that prioritised ontological validation and proposed African socialism as an adequate political system for a postcolonial African path (Nkrumah 1964; 1972; Kaunda 1966; Nyerere 1968; Mudimbe 1988; Hountondji 2002). This had a significant effect on scholars' failures to adequately investigate an African political philosophy of needs. This is because postcolonialism African intellectual elites legitimised the various strands of scholarship that sought to disentangle African philosophical positions from the debased lived realities under colonialism by promoting discourses on humanism (personhood), African epistemology, decolonisation, racism and communitarianism, among others (Nkrumah 1972; Menkiti 1984; Gyekye 1995; Eze 2008).

African scholars formed their political positions on the basis of a strong ethical communitarian viewpoint that they assumed on a foundation believed to be necessary for African socialism. Ifeanyi Menkiti (1984) observes that the various societies found in traditional Africa routinely accept the fact that personhood is a social status that is attained in direct proportion as one participates in communal life through the discharge of the various obligations defined by one's community. The existence of a person is contextualised in community, and the community engages in a reciprocal relation with the individual. This is the core of the popular ubuntu aphorism: "I am because we are; since we are therefore, I am" (Menkiti 1984; Ramose 2002; Kaphagawani 2004; Masolo 2010). This aphorism is unique to sub-Saharan Africa. Scholars like Kaphagawani (2004) argue that all sub-Saharan countries are at one with the communitarianism that is at the core of the ubuntu aphorism. John Mbiti (1969, 108–109) elaborates as follows,

the individual is simply part of the whole. The community must therefore make, create, or produce the individual; for the individual depends on the corporate group...Whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual.

Scholars like Segun Gbadegesin (1998) argue that there is a greater emphasis on the normative dimension of a person, and this entails the judgement of the moral worthiness of the human being in relation to the community. The idea is that there is a commitment to the community in ways that undermine individual needs and wants.

There are views from Western political scientists, like Jack Donnelly (1982) and African philosophers like Claude Ake (1987), that argue that the concept of human rights, expressed as needs, is alien to African philosophy and community. Donnelly (1982, 303) presents his argument as follows: "most non-Western cultural and political traditions (including Africa) lack not only the practice of human rights but the very concept...the concept of human rights is an artefact of modern Western civilization". Likewise, Claude Ake's (1987, 5) insightful commentary on the status of rights in Africa:

The values implicit in all this [rights] are clearly alien to those of our [African] traditional societies. We put less emphasis on the individual and more on the collectivity; we do not allow that the individual has any claims which may override that of the society. We assume harmony, not divergence of interests, competition and conflict; we are more inclined to think of our obligations to other members of our society rather than our claims against them.

The idea that emerges from Ake's positions, like other dominant African philosophical positions

on rights, is that the individual has very little stake because the collective is always the priority. It is safe to argue that an African understanding of morality and needs is grounded in community and not on individual claims for entitlements from the state (Cobbah 1987). Similarly, Oruka and Juma (1994, 125) ask, “Why, for example, would we not see it as senseless that an individual member of a family would want to do anything she wishes with her possessions, while a member of her kith and kin may be in desperate need of her help?”. Again, there is a moral undertone in Oruka and Juma’s question that commands an imperative to focus on an understanding and commitment to duty and the needs of the family (the collective) rather than on individual needs. The “senselessness” that they refer to lies in the absurdity attached to the thought that an individual could desire to neglect this collective imperative.

The foundation of this collective focus on community needs and interests is also evident in Kwasi Wiredu’s (2002) account of the Akan community in Ghana. Using the analogy of a crocodile with two heads and one stomach, representing an ethical and moral symbol of community, Wiredu bases his conception of need on communal interest. The point for Wiredu (2002, 197) is that, “although human beings have a core of common interests, they also have conflicting interests”, therefore, “the aim of morality, as also derivatively of statesmanship, is to harmonize these warring interests through systematic adjustment and adaptation”. Wiredu advances a communitarian understanding built on a harmonious communitarian viewpoint. The commitment for Wiredu, like most strict communitarians, is the harmonisation of interests. As such, the foundation of Wiredu’s communitarian moral action reads as follows:

Let your conduct at all times manifest a due concern for the interests of others...a person may be said to manifest a due concern for the interests of others if in contemplating the impact of his actions on their interests, she puts herself imaginatively in their position (Wiredu 1996, 31).

The emphasis for Wiredu is community, and his collective, centred approach arguably undermines and overrides individuals’ interests. Wiredu’s position raises a major concern, which rests on the individual will to pursue needs. It is plausible to further argue that Wiredu’s argument hinges on the position that individuals cannot legislate for themselves; it is the community that legislates for the individual and the individual must act based on the moral mandates of the community.

### **Weaknesses of existing African philosophical conceptions of needs**

As highlighted above, various investigations of communitarianism and its normative implications have had enormous effects on African political philosophy, especially as it pertains to an African political philosophy of needs. Scholars like Kwasi Wiredu, as presented in the above section, along the lines of political theoretical positions of Oruka and Juma (1994) and Paul Hountondji (2002), argue that “the principle of consensus...was based on the belief that ultimately the interests of all members of society are the same, although their immediate perceptions of those interests may be different” (Wiredu 1996, 185). This is the dominant strict communitarian conception of interests, a position that does not consider the separateness of individuals and legitimises the violation of the rights of individuals for the community. The community legislates for the individual, and individuals’ commitments to the community compels a submission to the will of the community.

This strict communitarian stance is informed by an intellectual obsession with the African communitarian position, especial strict communitarianism. The social, economic and political realities in Africa confirm the position held by Asante Molefi (2007, 3) that

Africa is not static; one can neither claim Africa as it was one hundred years ago, not fifty years ago, nor five years ago. The continent is preeminent as a dynamic locus for transformation. We are the catalyst for this change.

Hence, regardless of how commendable I deem the strict communitarian-based position of African political philosophy of needs, communitarian positions constitute the problem because they create a language that is structured in a way that negates the possibility of individual autonomy, freedom, choice and accountability in theorising about needs in Africa. As such, the predominant



communitarian positions help to institutionalise an idea of needs that does not allow people to articulate their *specific* needs. Therefore, I propose a different way of understanding an African political philosophy of needs starting from individuals' various contexts of needs.

Scholars like David Wiggins (2002) and Lawrence Hamilton (2003; 2009) draw substantially on Western thought to provide a significant contribution to the political philosophy of needs that African communitarian theory does not consider. A non-Western scholar whom Hamilton draws on is Amartya Sen, notably his "capability approach", which explores the conditions that have to be put in place to sustain the dignity of the human person. For Sen (1974; 1979a; 1979b), the capability approach entails the conditions that promote human freedom to actualise the potentiality to do and be. While highlighting the significance of deliberations, Sen's (2005, 158) position rejects "one predetermined canonical list of capabilities, chosen by theorists without any general social discussion or public reasoning". Nussbaum (2000, 72; 2006) justifies this list by arguing that each of these capabilities is needed for a human life to be "not so impoverished that it is not worthy of the dignity of a human being". The actualisation of individual potentiality makes capabilities important for ensuring human dignity in the pursuit of individual needs.

Drawing on the theoretical positions of scholars like Sen and Nussbaum, Hamilton (2003) argues that the abstraction of contemporary political philosophy, which focuses on justice, political participation and democratic sovereignty, among others, has had a deleterious effect on addressing a compelling, positive conception of human needs. In a later work, Hamilton (2021, 171) argues that communitarian is a reactionary response to Western political models like utilitarianism and capitalism. He argues, therefore, that communitarianism does not give an account of individual needs and must be discarded and replaced with a language that sufficiently accounts for needs – "the language of needs". Michael Eze (2008, 388) also argues that "the identity or subjectivity of the individual and the community are mutually constitutive and hence none is supreme", and it is in this direction that I intend to develop my analysis. In this sense, the study of an African political philosophy of needs must begin with an interrogation of the communitarian conceptions in African societies. In communitarian conceptions lie a consensual understanding of needs where "the individual inevitably requires the succour and relationships of others in order to realise or satisfy basic needs" (Gyekye 1995, 155). While Michael Eze only identifies the constitutive mutual relation between the individual and the community, drawing on the works of Gyekye, I intend to illustrate what I see as the role of autonomy, found in moderate communitarianism, in theorising about needs in African politics. To a considerable extent, some strict communitarian African scholars have focused mainly on how needs are formulated with a strong commitment to the community. What they miss in their account of needs is the importance of engaging needs in relation to autonomy, freedom, choice and accountability.

The significance of these in theorising about needs is that it reinforces not only a commitment to the community, but also to the individual. By autonomy, I mean the individual ability to maintain a subjectivity that the community cannot override. This necessarily connects with the understanding of freedom, which I use here as the ability to legislate for oneself. This ability to legislate for oneself brings about an autonomous disposition towards the alternatives that people can choose from. Lastly, accountability is understood as the act of being answerable for situations that one might be directly or indirectly responsible for. These conceptual frameworks will inform and justify why Gyekye's "moderate communitarianism" provides a plausible model for thinking about an African political philosophy of needs in Africa.

### **Gyekye's moderate communitarianism: Reformulating an African political philosophy of needs**

Different from Hamilton, who dismisses communitarianism in general, I find Gyekye's position plausible in formulating an African political philosophy of needs. Gyekye's moderate communitarianism is a direct critique of strict or what is sometimes referred to as "radical communitarianism". Gyekye's moderate communitarianism is a proposed re-adjustment of strict communitarian views. The explicit concern, and arguable political underpinnings of strict communitarians, is the fear of potential freeloaders in the society. In other words, strict

communitarians want to structure the community in a way that an individual's ability to legislate is determined by the community of persons. Gyekye (1997, 54) challenges this strict communitarian outlook when he writes that

[t]he capacity for self-assertion that the individual can exercise presupposes, and in fact derives from, the autonomous nature of the person. By autonomy, I do not mean self-completeness, but having of a will, a rational will of one's own, that enables one to determine at least some of one's own goals and to pursue them, and to control one's destiny.

These are attributes that appear to be lacking in the strict communitarian account of interests and needs as these are controlled by the community. The desire for autonomy and self-legislation is shackled by the community. For Gyekye (1997, 63),

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

Gyekye (1997, 55–56) disagrees with this strict autonomous nature of the individual because for him the individual, as part of the community, cannot be a cramped person “responding robotically to the ways and demands of the communal structure. The structure is never to be conceived as reducing a person to intellectual or rational inactivity, servility and docility”. Gyekye not only challenges the moral imposition of the community on the individual, he also questions the docile state of reduced creativity that is imposed on the individual. In a nutshell, Gyekye accords an equal moral status to both the community and the individual (Gyekye 2004), and the implication is that the individual is allowed room to exercise their rights in expressing individual needs.

An important aspect of Gyekye's argument is the idea of common good, which has a clear mandate on individual good and collective good. For him, the common good means

a good that is common to individual human beings – at least those embraced within a community, a good that can be said to be commonly and universally, shared by all human individuals, a good the possession of which is essential for the ordinary or basic functioning of the individual in a human society (Gyekye 1997, 45).

To my mind, ensuring the common good, for Gyekye, is not only the duty of the community, it is also the duty of the individual to contribute towards the common good. Gyekye's moderate communitarianism is built on the social and rational and the recognition of an individual's rights and worth. There is a relational approach to Gyekye's understanding of common good and needs in general. Metz (2021, 21) elaborates as follows:

According to the “intrinsic” perspective, a person needs socialization, recognition, aid, and the like in order to obtain some further things that are desirable for herself and make no essential reference to anyone but her. Perhaps she needs something from others in order for her to be healthy, feel good, or develop autonomy. In contrast, according to the “relational” approach, a person might instead (or also) need others in order to obtain something desirable that makes essential reference to someone else besides herself.

Different from an understanding of autonomy as self-absorption, the view of autonomy advanced by Gyekye and Metz is relational in a way that demands collective responsibility on the part of the community and the individual. This is a direct challenge to a strict communitarian position of communal legislation that deprives the individual of autonomy and creativity in the pursuit of needs. Moderate communitarianism challenges strict communitarian compliance and requires a communal measure of regulation and the pursuit of needs. To be sure, the commitment of strict communitarianism is to the community, a position different from the moderate communitarian commitment to the individual as part of the community. The value of moderate communitarianism to the community is in the extent to which it advances individual good and needs. For moderate

communitarianism, the individual and the separateness of persons are primary, while the community is secondary. The converse is the case for strict communitarianism, where the community is primary and the individual secondary.

The implication of the difference between strict communitarianism and moderate communitarianism is the issue of accountability. The disposition towards autonomy, freedom, choice and creativity in strict communitarianism is secondary. How can an individual be accountable when the individual cannot legislate for herself? In responding to this question, it is important to note that Gyekye (1997) does not undermine or refute the fact that individuals are born into an existing human society and are influenced by and become products of that society. While recognising the relational and social dimensions of an individual, Gyekye seeks to retain the autonomy and accountability that he considers an axiomatic moral mandate in every African society. This makes accountability necessary for an individual's ability to legislate for themselves in the community.

This relational accountability found in Gyekye's position and reiterated by Bell (1995, 97) when he writes about "constitutive communities" are important aspects of moderate communitarianism. With constitutive communities, Bell argues that existence is driven and informed by the larger constitution of the community that we originate from. In other words, the constitutive communities reflect our being in the world with others and inform our response to the question of our existence and origin. Amid this collective sense of existence, Gyekye (1997, 51) insists on an understanding of personhood that is modelled on humanity as moral responsible agents. By this, Gyekye's understanding of the common good is connected to his position on moral responsible agents, which is built on reciprocity, responsibility and accountability towards fellow human beings. The moral responsibility towards others compels accountability, and it must be held up in such a way that the lack thereof can exclude an individual from the community of persons. This is the foundation of social interaction and the conferment of personhood. There is a community context where morality is the yardstick for communal co-existence. For Gyekye, there is a difference between individuals and the community, a position that is different from the strict communitarian framework.

The point that I make in this article, especially as it pertains to Gyekye's moderate communitarianism and formulating an African political philosophy of needs, is that accountability is essential for theorising about needs in Africa. Moderate communitarianism provides a suitable framework for accountability in relation to needs in ways that strict communitarianism does not. Gyekye's position is similar to most communitarian positions, but Gyekye's moderate communitarianism is quick to insist and emphasise the autonomy that is necessary for an individual being with other individuals in the community. Gyekye (1997, 47–48) writes that

[t]he individual is by nature a social (communal) being, yes; but he [sic] is, also by nature, other things as well; that is, he [sic] possesses other attributes that may also be said to constitute her [sic] nature. The exercise or application or consideration of these attributes will whittle down or delimit the "authoritative" role or function that may be ascribed to, or invested in, the community. Failure to recognize this may result in pushing the significance and implications of the individual's social nature beyond their limits, an act that would in turn result in investing the community with an all-engulfing moral authority to determine all things about the life of the individual.

The moderate communitarian position advanced by Gyekye provides conceptions of autonomy and communitarianism that account for an individual's ability to legislate for themselves, and thus be accountable for their actions in the community. Put differently, the individual capacity for choice makes them accountable to themselves and to the community of individuals. It is on this basis that Gyekye (1997) rejects proponents of strict communitarians' treatment of rights as secondary values. For him, rights, and arguably needs, belong irreducibly and primarily to the individual. It should be realistically determined by an individual in relation with the needs of other individuals in the community.

The argument that Gyekye's moderate communitarianism illuminates is that accountability is necessary for the conceptualisation of needs in Africa. The absence of accountability, as rightly observed by Hamilton (2021), results in political leaders' or representatives' inability to adequately



show that they understand and foster the interests and needs of the people. In most cases, these leaders promote the interests and needs of their cronies. The nature of needs and interests are such that a significant level of commitment is dedicated to “identification, articulation, expression, evaluation and representation” (Hamilton 2021, 170) of needs. This process provides room for the articulation of both individual and collective conceptions of needs in a society. The individual and collectives – having played their roles – become responsible and accountable for their different roles in the realisation of the common good in society.

As opposed to the implausible conception of needs as singular, espoused by strict communitarianism, moderate communitarianism advances a position that reinforces the moral worth of both the individual and the community in deciding and becoming committed to and accountable for individual roles in promoting individual needs, while ensuring the common good in the community. Moderate communitarianism provides a framework for political representation and individual and collective articulation of their understanding of needs in a way that strict communitarianism does not. Moderate communitarianism reveals the pitfalls of strict communitarianism by negating the idea that needs and interests can be conceived as singular and communal. The current political climate in most African countries can be likened to the strict communitarian conception of needs where political elites impose an idea of needs on the people without any interests in individuals’ articulations or representation. While the strict communitarian model favours political elites, as it imposes a collective idea of needs and is free from accountability, it undermines the ability of individuals to legislate for themselves through the articulation of their needs. This authoritarian conception of needs must give way in political representation to a moderate communitarian paradigm that promotes the articulation of needs.

Furthermore, a society following a moderate communitarian model would work in a way that promotes socio-economic and political justice for all. This is because a moderate communitarian society is structured in a way that takes into account the various realities of the people and actively ensures that individual understanding of well-being is taken into account in promoting economic and social justice. Individuals, while maintaining their individual goals, are also committed to the collective, and the collective goals do not override their individual goals. This is contrary to a strict communitarian outlook that risks promoting and advancing the needs of only a few.

## Conclusion

This article has engaged the political, social and economic models that have held sway in the strict communitarian conceptions of needs. I have argued that strict communitarianism, often presented as a political model that unifies needs, presents an elitism that controls and manipulates society in the guise of a genuine awareness of individual and collective needs. I have also addressed the false positions of strict communitarian that do not consider the need for individuals to legislate for themselves in ways that promote accountability, contextual sensitivity, separateness of individual needs, individual moral abilities and value and freedom of choice.

Moderate communitarianism, as presented by Gyekye, provides a suitable path for thinking and theorising about needs in Africa. Gyekye’s position, as I have argued, shows how individual needs are as important as collective needs. This is a position this is not espoused by strict communitarians who focus mainly on collective needs, often at the expense of individual needs. The significance of freedom, choice and autonomy clears a path for a new way of engaging with needs in Africa, and this path must consider individual and collective accountability as a necessary component of theorising about needs in Africa. It is only when individuals can legislate for themselves through articulation, participation, representation and genuine consideration of their needs that political leaders and representatives can become agents of political change.

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