

FREEDOM, RESPONSIBILITY, AND DEMOCRATIC ACCOUNTABILITY: AN AFRICAN NORMATIVE PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Freedom, responsibility, and democratic accountability are political and philosophical constants in a plethora of discussions concerning the growth of contemporary Africa. The democratic models that were inherited from colonial legacies are liberal and are characterized primarily by individual choice and rights. These models neglect the communitarian moral fabric that is common among African Societies. It is premised on this that this paper aims to interrogate the drawbacks of western liberal democratic model in leading towards the expression of the African's moral vision of human agency and accountability. The paper shall draw from African normative frameworks such as *Ubuntu* and *Omolúàbí* to reposition freedom on a pedestal where it shall not be looked upon as being isolated from others but rather as a moral condition that is contingent on a responsible participation in the community life of one's society. This is achieved through hermeneutic and comparative philosophical methodologies. Hence, the paper will engage key African thinkers in the likes of Gyekye, Mentiki, and Wiredu to explore alternative standards of democratic accountability founded on the communal character of the traditional African society. Consequently, the paper argues that the erosion of accountability in multifarious African democracies is as a result of the disembedding of political freedom from moral responsibility. Therefore, the paper concludes that Africa ought to transcend procedural elections, but not dispose of it, towards cultivating societies where to be free is to be answerable both to the self and to the community. Hence the paper provides a basis for reimagining democracy as not merely a political arrangement but rather as a moral practice.

Keywords: Communitarian Ethics, Moral Accountability, Ubuntu, Ethical Democracy, Freedom and Responsibility

INTRODUCTION

Democratic accountability across many African states is intrinsically fragile. It is because of this that democracy fails in many African states. However, this failure is not merely a technical failure of institutions; it is also a moral and conceptual problem. In contemporary discussion, the participatory understanding of democracy results in treating the concept primarily as being characterized by procedures, namely: elections, separation of powers, rights, political participation, and more. This model has been inherited wholesale from liberal western traditions. While these procedural conceptions of democracy are necessary for its execution, they are not sufficient. Democratic practices require a horizon that is normative, one that connects the claims of freedom to obligations of responsibility. Without this relationship, electoral tussles degenerate into clientelism, elite capture, and even moral indifference. This

paper is motivated by the attempt to bridge this gap and thus argues for a re-anchoring of democratic accountability in an African moral ontology that sees freedom as responsibility-laden, promising a normative foundation for durable, ethical democratic life in African polities.

To effectively bring this to the fore, it must be mentioned that the African normative framework provides the conceptual resource for this task. Classic and contemporary accounts of African personhood emphasize the fact that the individual does not exist in isolation, but rather that the individual is formed in and through social relations. This is captured beautifully in the formulation: “I am, because we are: and since we are, therefore I am” (Mbiti, 1970, 141). This suggests that freedom in many African moral vocabularies, rather than being abstract autonomy of an isolated agent, is exercised responsibly within networks of mutual recognition and obligations.

In furtherance to the above, one could argue that it is in the recognition of the intrinsic relationship that one has with the society that such an individual’s contribution to the community can be optimal. Little wonder that Thaddeus Metz argues that human dignity can only be understood “by virtue of a person’s capacity for community” (Metz, 2011, p. 532). Succinctly put then, human rights and public morality are a consequence from capacities of identification and solidarity rather than from isolation. This understanding reframes democratic accountability thus: leaders are moral agents answerable to the communal goods that sustain dignity and not merely vote-winning strategists.

Sequel from this conceptual vantage point, the paper advances a programmatic claim as such: democracy in Africa should be reconceived as a moral practice of ethical citizenship. That is, a situation where civic life is characterized by freedom and responsibility being mutually constitutive. This entails the advocacy of political cultures that prioritize the understanding of public office as service, civic education emphasizes reciprocal obligations as well as rights, and deliberative institutions privilege consensus-seeking norms that resonate with indigenous communitarian sensibilities. Little wonder that contemporary scholarship on *Ubuntu* and public leadership suggest concrete governance models that integrate ethical formation into public institutions (Sipondo, 2025).

To achieve the aim of this study, the paper shall first provide a short critique of liberal conception of freedom. Thereupon, the paper shall engage in an exposition of African normative traditions (*Ubuntu*, *Omólúàbí*). After this exposition, the paper shall engender a normative reconstruction that seeks to show how freedom conceived relationally grounds democratic accountability. By doing so, the paper shall suggest a normative pathway for rethinking democracy that insists on the mutually constitutive relationship between freedom and responsibility in Africa. And also that democratic legitimacy requires moral answerability to the communities that make freedom meaningful.

LIBERAL CONCEPTION OF FREEDOM AND ITS LIMITS IN AFRICA

The liberal conception of freedom is arguably the most influential idea of freedom that has influenced modern democratic systems. It conceptualizes the human person as an agent that is autonomous with the faculty of choice. It also emphasizes that this freedom must be guarded against external interference. Isaiah Berlin provides one of the most influential sources for this conception. In his classic essay, *Two Conceptions of Liberty*, Berlin (1969, p. 122) highlights his understanding of freedom as the instance and/or space within which a person can act unobstructed by others. This understanding of freedom that prioritizes autonomy, rights and self-determination became the normative basis of what is now democracy in Europe and North America. It is no wonder then that political institutions in the likes of parliaments, constitutions, and elections were primarily designed to safeguard individuals against tyranny while protecting personal choice and conscience from being infringed by state or social authority.

This liberal conception of freedom reveals deep limitations when transposed into the African context. Its foundational ideals that the human being is an isolated and self-sufficient individual are at odds with many African moral and social worldviews. This is because African societies define personhood relationally as a process achieved through one's participation in the community. This is succinctly captured by Mbiti as initially quoted: "I am because we are...". This quoted ethos is often cited but rarely appreciated in its full ontological significance. It expresses a truly radical vision of human existence that is different: a vision where the single individual's identity and worth are meaningless when conceived outside the community. That is, one's identity and worth are constituted by social relations and moral interdependency rather than by isolation and independence.

The stark distinction then is that liberal freedom presupposes an already autonomous self who has rights by virtue of being human while African normative thought conceives autonomy as a status one attains by fulfilling social and moral responsibilities. Kwame Gyekye reflects this in his defence of what he calls "moderate communitarianism". He argues that individuals possess autonomy but such an autonomy, for him, is embedded within the community. Gyekye (1997, p. 38) opines that the individual by his very nature is a social being whose capacities are actualized in a community and that "the rights of the individual must therefore be exercised with due regard for the well-being of others". This position exposes the imbalance in liberalism, namely, while liberal democracy recognizes rights, it neglects the correlative duties and responsibilities that sustains the moral fabric of society.

A further problem associated with incorporating liberal freedom in Africa is in its reduction of democracy to mere procedures. Liberal democracy, in many African states, was employed as a model of governance only after they gained independence. Consequently, the practice of democracy often rather than not, degenerates to what Nic Cheesman (2015, p. 12) calls "a façade of elections without accountability." The focus of the liberal system is usually on institutional mechanisms such as elections, constitutions, and formal rights. This focus, often than not, overshadows the moral preconditions that establish those institutions as meaningful.

This results in a form of democratic practice that protects political freedom only in theory while permitting widespread corruption, nepotism, and elite domination in practice.

In furtherance to the above, African philosophers such as Kwasi Wiredu and Thaddeus Metz attempted proffering alternative democratic frameworks grounded in indigenous moral thought. Wiredu (1996, p. 180) was of the opinion that deliberation and communal harmony ought to take precedence ahead of adversarial competition. This was the core principle of what he calls “consensual democracy”. In a similar way, Metz (2011, p. 534) made efforts to reconstruct the philosophy of *Ubuntu* into a moral theory by arguing that human dignity is drawn from our “capacity for community, understood as the combination of identifying with others and exhibiting solidarity with them.” This is a clear presentation of the relational ontology that this paper argues for; that is, to be human is to participate in the community. Consequent upon this, freedom is hence not a withdrawal from others but an ethical engagement with them.

From this vantage point, the insistence on the priority of rights over duties that characterizes the liberal conception of democracy and freedom appears to be both philosophically limited and politically constraining. A democracy, one may argue, that guarantees the rights of individuals but however neglects their moral responsibility breeds citizens who conceive political participation as self-interest rather than service. It is not surprising that Kwame Anthony Appiah (2005, p. 170) notes that moral identity within the African clime seems to be “a function of one’s capacity to sustain relations of respect, reciprocity and mutual support,” where liberal individualism, on the contrary, risks valorizing independence at the expense of moral solidarity. The decline, therefore, of accountability in African democracies can be seen as a consequence of this conceptual dislocation; namely, political freedom detached from ethical responsibility.

The paper does not outrightly reject liberalism but rather seeks to supplement and reinterpret it by means of a rejuvenation through African normative categories. Freedom and responsibility can be understood as mutually constitutive and reinforcing. Hence, a citizen can exercise his/her freedom only to the extent that he/she assumes responsibility for the welfare of both others and the community at large. In the same way, leaders need to understand that they are accountable not merely because institutions check them and demand that they should be accountable, but rather because moral norms, grounded in communal values, make accountability a virtue. Intrinsically linking freedom to its roots of moral responsibility can aid in rebuilding the ethical legitimacy of African democracies.

AFRICAN NORMATIVE THOUGHT

The African normative thought is an alternative framework for viewing human freedom. As previously established, this framework reconstructs liberty not as an isolation of oneself from others, but rather as meaningfully participating in a community of mutual care and responsibility. The liberal conception privileges the individual’s autonomy while, in contrast,

African moral philosophies conceive personhood and moral agency as properties that emerge as a result of social relations. The human person, one could argue, is not born already-made as a fully constituted moral agent. On the contrary, the human being becomes a person through interaction, recognition, and contribution to communal life. This intrinsically communitarian basis transforms even our presentation of the concept of freedom; to be free is not to stand apart, but rather to stand in relation. As Mbiti (1989, p. 141) argues, “whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual.” The implication of this point of view is that freedom is inseparable from moral responsibility. That is, freedom is not the right to pursue individual preferences in isolation, rather, it is the capacity to live in harmony with others while upholding reciprocal obligations and sustaining the moral balance of the community. Mentiki (1984, p. 171) explains that the African self is meaningful only in reference to the community which he/she is part of, and that such personhood is acquired in direct proportion as one participates in communal life. Succinctly put, freedom is a product of belonging, it is a moral crown grounded in the expression of responsibility.

African normative models as expressed in *Ubuntu* in Southern Africa, *Omólúàbí* in Yoruba ethics, and *Ujamaa* in Nyerere’s African socialism all share the characteristics of a relational conception of human existence. The word *Ubuntu* is derived from the Nguni expression *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (which translates to “a person is a person through other persons”). Metz (2011) reconstructs this idea into a formal theory by proposing that actions are right only when the “prize relationships of identity and solidarity” because “to honour human dignity is to honour our capacity for community.” To put this more simply, a person’s moral freedom can only be realized through the exemplification of solidarity rather than withdrawal from others.

Also, the moral ideal of *Omólúàbí* as expressed by the Yorubas underscores integrity, humility, and respect for elders as expressions of human thriving and excellence. Gbadegesin (1991, p. 65) opines that rather than being individualistic, the Yoruba conception of personhood is a social achievement which is a product of moral and spiritual maturity. Someone who is free is not merely one who acts as he wishes, on the contrary, it is someone who acts rightly and is guided by communal norms that define virtue. Julius Nyerere’s idea of *Ujamaa* (familyhood) was an attempt to transform the ethics of mutual dependency into a socio-political order. He does this by insisting that “freedom must be accompanied by a sense of responsibility to others, otherwise it degenerates into selfishness” (Nyerere, 1968, p. 4). These various perspectives that express the relational idea of freedom all converge on a common insight, namely, that freedom without responsibility is morally vacuous and politically destructive.

Gyekye and Wiredu, too, have elaborated these indigenous insights and reflected them in contemporary philosophical terms. On the one hand, Gyekye’s notion of “moderate communitarianism” finds a balance between the intrinsic worth of the individual with the indispensability of community. He does this effectively when he asserts that the well-being of the individual and that of the community are mutually contingent on one another (Gyekye, 1997, 39). On the other hand, Wiredu insists that the moral logic of African political life ought

to be built on consensus. He argues that decisions were made through prolonged dialogue aimed at achieving communal harmony rather than through the aggregation of competing individual preferences (Wiredu, 1996, p. 180). From this perspective, therefore, freedom is exemplified through deliberation, listening and seeking consensus thereby making it a moral act as much as a political one.

It goes without saying that this conception of freedom as relational has profound implications for democratic accountability in Africa as it suggests that governance should not rely solely on the formal protection of rights alone. Governance ought to be characterized by the desire to cultivate an ethical disposition that sustains communal life. Leaders and citizens alike are free when they act responsibly towards the good of the entire community. Therefore, political legitimacy should be premised on moral accountability to the community rather than merely on electoral consent. By inscribing moral responsibility into the fabric of the concept of freedom, African normative thought offers a corrective to the moral lack and deficit in liberal proceduralism. This is consequent upon the fact that it turns democracy into a shared project of ethical co-existence rather than just a contest of rights.

RESPONSIBILITY AND THE MORAL FOUNDATIONS OF DEMOCRATIC ACCOUNTABILITY

Democratic accountability requires a moral ecology that ensures actors are answerable to others. Formal and procedural mechanisms are necessary but not sufficient if citizens and leaders do not inhabit a shared landscape that understands public office as service instead of a rent-seeking endeavour. Staffan Lindberg shows clearly how legislators face a plurality of accountability pressures in three ways: vertically from voters, horizontally from institutions, and diagonally from media and civil society. Lindberg (2010) went further to argue that legislators respond differently depending on the moral and political context in which they operate. That is to say that where the moral incentives to serve the common good are weak, institutional pressures and the genuine demand for accountability become mere games or hollowed out.

In recent years, some African states have witnessed falling amid military coups and corruption. This could be said to be the result of growing dissatisfaction with liberal democratic ideals that have failed in producing a system that is meaningful to the African core. When citizens do not perceive moral accountability oozing from their leaders, electoral mechanisms lose legitimacy and democratic accountability erodes.

Normative African resources such as have been mentioned – *Ubuntu* – suggests a more complementary moral vocabulary that strengthens accountability of appropriately translated into civic practice and life. Some scholars propose that the Ubuntu-inspired leadership model cultivates ethical dispositions such as solidarity, humility, and service which reorients political actors towards communal goods. Integrating *Ubuntu* into public leadership, Sipondo (2005) argues, counteract the moral governance crisis by making responsibility an indispensable virtue

integral to any office of leadership. Embedding norms such as these within public sector routines and civic education has the potential of buttressing moral accountability since citizens are ordinarily primed to demand for morally grounded responsiveness.

Policy analyses also emphasize that when institutions and moral cultures cohere, moral accountability regimes work best. Resnick et al. (2005) on comparative studies emphasize a form of hybrid approach that puts together both legal instruments (such as audits, transparency law) with investments in civic formation and social norms as a way that stigmatizes corruption. For contexts with more fragile democratic systems, some other scholars note that legality without moral legitimacy exhibits the risks of formal compliance but not substantive accountability. Therefore, strengthening institutional accountability while cultivating civic virtues and leadership ethics rooted in locally credible moral traditions is a strategy that is more productive.

From our arguments so far, one can surmise that responsibility is the moral ballast of democratic accountability. Moral norms expressed through *Ubuntu*, religious teachings, community sanctions or civic education supply the motives and expectations that make accountability more practically attainable rather than institutional checks that merely creates scaffolding. The attempt to restore democratic accountability in many African polities requires a deliberate effort oriented towards weaving moral formation into the very fabric of its existence and public life. Leadership development that prioritizes service, reciprocity and public narratives that valorize answerability are models that will achieve accountability. Devoid of such moral framework, elections and laws become mechanical and inhuman.

RECONSTRUCTING DEMOCRACY: FROM PROCEDURALISM TO MORAL CITIZENSHIP

The political theorist Chantal Mouffe (2000, p. 80) opines that “a democracy that confines itself to procedural rules without cultivating democratic ethos risks degenerating into an empty shell”. Succinctly put, without a parallel moral foundation that encourages civic responsibility, democracy in Africa would be reduced to mere procedural formalities. And, the African experience manifests this danger very clearly as electoral democracy without moral citizenship tends to produce elite capture, clientelism, and alienation of the governed from governance.

It becomes imperative, therefore, to advocate for the reconstruction of democracy in Africa characterized by a paradigm shift from proceduralism to moral citizenship. This alternative model is one in which democratic legitimacy is derived not only from institutional processes but also from the ethical quality of civic life. It is not surprising, hence that, Metz (2011) and Gyekye (1997) argue that African moral philosophy provides a rich understanding of communal personhood and responsibility that can serve as a moral bedrock for public life. Within this framework, citizenship is not merely a status granted by the state, it is rather a calling that binds individuals to the common good.

Greg Mills and other scholars (2019, p. 5), in *Democracy Works: Rewiring Politics to Africa's Advantage*, argue that democratic consolidation “depends on the cultivation of accountable leadership and responsible citizen engagement, not only the holding of elections”. This perspective resonates with the growing realization that regurgitative procedural democracy is susceptible if not undergirded by an ethos of mutual accountability. Citizens become mere spectators if democratic participation is reduced to episodic voting. However, instances where citizenship is understood as a moral duty, political participation transcends into daily practices of honesty, solidarity, and civic courage.

Premised on this, the moral reconstruction of democracy entails the reimagining of citizenship as a phenomena of ethical formation. Drawing on *ubuntu*, *omolúàbí*, and *ujamaa*, African normative discourses highlight the relational nature of human agency and its implications for civic responsibility. *Ubuntu's* framing of personhood was realized through caring relations with others and thus, by extension, political authority grounds leadership in service. Metz (2022, p. 28) buttresses this when he says that “to live morally is to live in a way that prizes communal relationships where one identifies with others and exhibits solidarity”. This understanding of community moves democratic theory beyond the minimalist proceduralism of liberal institutions and reorients it towards cultivating virtues that sustain trust and reciprocity.

Another perspective is in understanding that moral citizenship entails transforming the educational and civic infrastructures that shape citizen's dispositions. Schools, religious institutions and local governance structure ought to take up the task of reorienting their perspectives to promote civic ethics rather than mere political literacy. The 2025 African Governance Report by the UN Economic Commission for Africa relates this need: “the sustainability of democratic institutions depends on embedding ethics of public service and moral leadership within civic education” (UNECA, 2025). The living substance of democracy, in this instance, would now be what defines civic virtue rather than its rhetorical ornament.

Reconstructing democracy, therefore, implies a renewed conception of political leadership. Individuals aspiring for leadership positions ought to be evaluated not merely by procedural legitimacy (winning elections) but rather by their commitment to justice, compassion and stewardship of the public good. In this instance, hence, accountability becomes moral before it becomes legal. This validates the view that African democracies will only mature when “the ethos of leadership reflects the moral values of the society it governs” (Sipondo, 2025). Consequently, moral citizenship and moral leadership become mutually constitutive and mutually reinforcing, thereby restoring democracy's ethical soul.

CONCLUSION

Africa's democratic renewal will not be borne only from institutional reform but rather from a normative renaissance that is characterized by a moral awakening that reconnects freedom, responsibility and governance to the deeper ethical traditions of African life. We have argued

that liberal proceduralism is an essential framework for representation, but it has, however, failed to generate the civic trust and accountability that sustains democratic legitimacy. It is not surprising that Fukuyama (2022, p. 132) noted that “democratic decay is less about weak institutions than about morals within them”. A philosophical reorientation that prioritizes the cultivation of a moral citizenship rooted in communal responsibility and dignity is what the task of reconstructing democracy in Africa requires.

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