

African Communitarian Ethics in the Theological Work of Bénédzet Bujo

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Abstract: The community and individual dimensions of morality are problematic especially in communitarian ethics. Bénédzet Bujo's work is presented in this essay as a way to reconcile the individual and communal aspects in African communitarian ethics. The central role of the community in shaping an African ethics, from Bujo's perspective, does not in any way negate the sanctity and inviolability of the individual person as a moral agent. African palaver is not useless talk but an inclusive moral discernment process in a community. From a critical study of Bujo's African Christian ethics, the essay evaluates the relevance of his work in contemporary African contexts while also questioning the historical context and the cultural homogeneity presumed. Further, African communitarian ethics is viewed as a viable alternative to western subjectivist ethics and ethical theories applied in Christian ethics.

THE WORK OF BÉNÉZET BUJO is an analysis of African communitarian ethics from the perspective of Christian ethics. Born in the Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire) and currently teaching at the University of Fribourg in Switzerland, Bujo is an African moral theologian whose work focuses on developing an African Christian ethics that is informed by culture and history. It is a search for an authentically African ethics different from western moral theories, and especially the natural law tradition of western moral thinking. That tradition, as developed from Thomas Aquinas, takes human nature or reason as a capacity for distinguishing between what is morally good and to be done, and what is evil and to be avoided. The emphasis in African communitarian ethics, on the other hand, while also appealing to moral reasoning, lies upon relationship as the determinant factor in the development of moral norms.

This study examines the communal and the individual dimensions in African ethics as represented in the work of Bujo. Any ethical system in Africa will have the community as its centre, since it is the community that makes individuality possible. In an African traditional setting there is no individual human being without the community; the community is a “communion” of individuals. In particular, Bujo presents the idea of the palaver, a coming together for moral deliberation, as a moral norm-finding process in which the individual and the community interact in dialogue. Taking account of the way in which community shapes moral reasoning in an African context, I propose to set out, analyse and critically assess the communitarian ethics of Bénézet Bujo as offering an alternative to the emphasis upon individual moral autonomy in Christian and western ethics.

1. THE COMMUNITY DIMENSION IN AFRICAN MORAL REASONING

Contemporary African societies have undergone various cultural and social changes. Africa’s encounter with the West led to the introduction of western education and culture. Today, people in many African urban centres have embraced some western individualism and social practices. Despite all these changes, Bujo claims that African communitarianism is still a major factor in African societies and has suggested it as a possible foundation for an African theological ethics. According to Bujo, thought in an African community is inclusive. He affirms that “Africans do not think in ‘either/or,’ but rather in ‘both/and’ categories”.¹ Moral reasoning is a process in which an individual makes rational decisions concerning morality without forgetting that one is a member of a community. Individual morality affects the well-being (flourishing) of a community in an African ethic. It is this line of thinking that is decisive for Bujo: “For Black Africa, it is not the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum* (“I think, therefore I am”) but an existential *cognatus sum, ergo sumus* (“I am known, therefore we are”) that is decisive.”² This can also be clarified in

1. Bénézet Bujo, *Foundations of an African Ethic: Beyond the Universal Claims of Western Morality*, trans. Brian McNeil (New York: Crossroad, 2001) 1.

2. Bujo, *Foundations*, 4. See also by Bujo, *Utamadunisho na Kanisa La Mazingira* [Inculturation and Basic Christian Communities] (Nairobi: Pauline Publications, 1999). Writing in Kiswahili language, Bujo states: “Africans very much emphasize people’s coming together in a meeting. There is the family meeting, elders meeting, relatives meeting, tribal meetings, etc. What does the word accomplish in a meeting? In a meeting everybody is allowed to express and explain oneself. A meeting is a time of seeing whether the word we ‘ate’ was chewed well so as to bring out fullness of life, uniting people.” (p. 9) [Translation mine].

the common African maxim: "I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am."³

Reclaiming the lost centrality of community living provides a good foundation not only to theological ethics but also to other areas of theology such as inter-religious dialogue, ecumenism, ecclesiology, sacraments, and pastoral ministry, among others. An individual in an African traditional setting is always in communion with the community. An African community is made up of individual human beings who communicate with each other. This communication is present in all areas of daily living. For example, Nwaka Egbulem states the following on the Zairean liturgy of the Eucharist: "invocation of the saints and ancestors is made to establish a unity between the already triumphant church and the pilgrim church. It also seeks to obtain spiritual support for the living members who gather for worship. The invocation reveals the belief that the dead are not strangers to the present assembly of worship."⁴ And furthermore, "by opening the celebration with the invocation of saints and ancestors, the Zairean Mass identifies the Christian assembly as the meeting place between the Creator, the ancestors, and the living"⁵.

Nevertheless, the emphasis on community in African ethics should not be construed as replacing individual responsibility in moral decision-making and action. This essay primarily deals with Bujo's attempt to reconcile individual ethical responsibility and community ethical dimension. An emphasis on community ethics requires a balance or protection of individual moral autonomy. The protection of individual autonomy or self-determination is the basis of the human rights endeavour after the Second World War. For example, the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights was meant to protect individual persons from organizations such as those of state and religion.⁶ It is in this context of the community that the indispensability of the individual human being in moral discernment is to be emphasised.

3. John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2nd Edition (Oxford: Heinemann, 1990) 106; see also Theo Sundermeier, *The Individual and Community in African Traditional Religions* (Hamburg: Lit Verlag, 1998) 17.

4. Nwaka Chris Egbulem, *The Power of Africentric Celebrations: Inspirations from the Zairean Liturgy* (New York: Crossroad, 1996) 58.

5. Egbulem, *The Power of Africentric Celebrations*, 59.

6. Alan Gewirth, *Human Rights: Essays on Justification and Application* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982) 4. Gewirth argues human rights protect conditions necessary for human (moral) actions. See also David Little, "Religion, Human Rights, and Secularism: Preliminary Clarifications and Some Islamic, Jewish, and Christian Responses", in William Schweiker et al. (eds.), *Humanity Before God: Contemporary Faces of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006) 256-283, see p. 256. Little suggests that human rights charters constrain religions and societies by imposing basic universal, individual and group protections.

II. THE INDIVIDUAL AND/OR THE COMMUNITY – UNDERSTANDING
INDIVIDUALITY IN THE COMMUNITY

Human beings are social beings, born into families, groups, tribes, clans, towns, cities, or countries. In an African context, there is no individuality without the community. In his writing Bujo seeks to develop an understanding of the individuality of a person in an African morality, where the individual and communal dimensions are inseparable. He argues that an African person, whose acting and thinking is always in solidarity and almost identical with his or her tribal community, is nonetheless able to make an ethical, responsible decision, as an individual.⁷ From this perspective personal freedom is possible but as Bujo acknowledges “too much emphasis on the interests of the clan can obscure individual freedom and individual rights”.⁸

In ethical thought generally, the rational and free nature of the individual human person is conceived as the ground of human morality, and Bujo somehow also shares this view.⁹ Individuality implies that one is capable of moral decisions. It means that one is not an object but a subject who acts in a responsible way. In an African context, individuality is expressed from the moment of birth in the ritual of name-giving. Each family member is given a unique name. This name characterises personal and ontological reality. But especially in an African context individuality means acting with the other since “the community...enables the self-realization of the individual”.¹⁰ Furthermore, decisions made by one person can have an effect on other people in a community.

Communitarian ethics raises the question of whether it is possible to have an autonomous ethics or individual moral autonomy.¹¹ A communitarian ethics implies that a particular community shapes its moral norms. Is it possible to have a communitarian ethics without at

7. Bujo, *African Christian Morality at the Age of Inculturation* (Nairobi: St Paul Publications, 1990) 95.

8. Bujo, *African Theology in its Social Context* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1992) 35.

9. It is worthwhile to note here that Bujo has a Thomistic background in his theological training. He wrote his dissertation on St Thomas Aquinas and it was published as *Moralautonomie und Normenfindung bei Thomas von Aquino: unter Einbeziehung der neutestamentlichen Kommentare* (München: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1979). Later he published his habilitation as *Die Begründung des Sittlichen: Zur Frage des Eudämonismus bei Thomas von Aquino* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1984).

10. Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community: The African Model and the Dialogue Between North and South* (Nairobi: Pauline Publications, 1998) 28.

11. Alfons Auer's book *Autonome Moral und christlicher Glaube* (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1971) led to the development of the debate on moral autonomy in Roman Catholic moral theology.

the same time recognising the individual person as a moral agent? Without individual persons who can make morally responsible decisions it seems impossible to have ethics at all, let alone a communitarian ethics. Bujo argues that the individual in an African communitarian ethic is at the centre of the determination of moral norms. It is not possible to answer the question of who comes first, the individual or a community, in an African communitarian ethic, since one presupposes the other.

The fact that individuality is inseparable from the communitarian nature of human existence in an African society implies that every person has to contribute to the well-being of the community. An ideal community consists of free individual persons who act as moral agents. Accordingly, Bujo states, "In the traditional setting, individuals could not be free unless they first contributed to the freedom of the whole community and vice versa."¹² Further, he suggests that "the individual is always bound to reflect on what is beneficial to herself or himself and to the whole community, and on what leads to participation in the eschatological communion, and what does not".¹³ He compares African communitarian ethics with Christian ethics:

The relationship between African "communitarian" and individual responsibility has immense implications for Christian ethics. On the one hand, Christians make very personal decisions before God. But on the other, they should not do so without regard for the faith community. The Christian is bound together with the Mystical Body. A good work is an important building-block of this Mystical Body.¹⁴

In a practical way, moral good or evil in a communitarian ethics is determined by whether a particular decision and action contributes positively to the life of the individual and the community. This extends not only to external actions but also to the level of intention, since morality, in a specific way, is both an internal and external act.¹⁵ From Bujo's perspective, an individual person in an African society is required

12. Bujo, *African Theology in its Social Context*, 7. See Claude Ozankom, "Oscar Bimwenyi: End of Discussion on the Possibility of African Theology", in Bénédet Bujo and Juvénal Ilunga Muya (eds.), *African Theology in the 21st Century: The Contribution of the Pioneers*, Vol. 1 (Nairobi: Pauline Publications, 2003) 95-106.

13. Bujo, *African Christian Morality at the Age of Inculturation*, 97.

14. Bujo, "Solidarity and Freedom: Christian Ethic in Africa", *Theology Digest* 44/1 (Spring, 1997) 48-50, see p. 49.

15. See Louis Janssens, "Teleology and Proportionality: Thoughts about the Encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*", in Joseph A. Selling and Jan Jans (eds.), *The Splendor of Accuracy: An Examination of the Assertions made by Veritatis Splendor* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1995) 99-113, see p. 102.

to fully interiorise the ethical demands of the community. These ethical demands include the integration of the ancestral norms by every member. To achieve this integration, taboos and even witchcraft have often a protective function for ethical norms.

An example is provided by the rites of initiation among many African peoples. Initiation is a form of education aimed at the integration of moral norms in a community. Bujo's analysis of African moral norms is similar to the one held by Laurenti Magesa, another African moral theologian. Referring to rites of initiation in Africa, Magesa notes, "The proverbs, riddles, songs, and dances, as well as other sources of ancestral wisdom used in this period, exude moral guidance."¹⁶ The rites of passage are words associated with the socialisation of the young and this learning process continues through life by means of the occasional songs which help to communicate and perpetuate the traditional understanding of the world and people's attitudes towards it. These rites promote and confirm individual responsibility in community. Noting that the initiates are taught the absolute value of life, Magesa adds, "The phase of formal instruction stresses five areas of ethical concern in the life of the individual and society: religion, the mystery of life and death, domestic and social virtues, sex and sexuality, and forms of self-identity."¹⁷ All these promote moral living in the community but do not exclude individual decisions through which one chooses what to do in various contexts.

To the charge that African morality is merely concerned with physical and external acts, Bujo responds by stating that "a deeper insight into African life shows that this is not so, but rather that he (an African person) has a deeply embodied moral consciousness".¹⁸ He emphasises the irreplaceable role of conscience, maintaining that "taboos are an important step in the formation of the moral conscience. Their function is to lead people to the formation and the interiorisation of ethical norms."¹⁹ Community moral norms, then, do not replace the individual interiority and interiorisation of the same norms. "Good and evil proceed from the interior of man. That is why, for example, an

16. Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1997) 97.

17. Magesa, *African Religion*. African initiation rites described here compare to the Christian rites of initiation which include the sacraments of baptism, eucharist, and confirmation. In an African Christian setting, recall of the traditional rites of initiation can be used to promote an in-depth understanding and living of the sacraments.

18. Bujo, *African Christian Morality at the Age of Inculturation*, 98.

19. Bujo, "Can Morality be Christian in Africa?" *African Christian Studies* 4 (1988) 5-39, see p. 10. See Josef Fuchs, "Conscience and Conscientious Fidelity", in Charles Curran (ed.), *Moral Theology: Challenges for the Future, Essays in Honor of Richard McCormick* (New York: Paulist, 1990) 108-124.

enemy who crosses his neighbor's field can cause a bad harvest, for his intention is bad."²⁰ It is therefore possible to talk of interiority in African ethic: "For the blacks also, good and evil arise from the *interior of the human being*. An evil look at somebody is held to be capable of harming or even killing a person. Likewise, someone pointing his finger maliciously at a neighbor does harm to him."²¹ In African ethics, then, just as in Christian ethics, the intention is just as important as the act itself.

Bujo's emphasis on individual morality as internalisation of community ethical norms does leave some questions unanswered. For example, can an individual person through a judgement of conscience differ with community moral requirements? Is it possible to uphold freedom of conscience in individual persons while maintaining community obligations as primary?

III. THE FLOURISHING OF THE COMMUNITY AND ITS RELATION TO INDIVIDUAL MORALITY

Too great a stress upon community life can raise concerns in regard to individual moral autonomy. Bujo has to show that the communitarian nature of African morality does not mean ending up with a scenario where the individual can be sacrificed for the sake of the nation or ethnic group. While stressing that "members of the clan have a duty to contribute to the growth of the clan by doing good", and also that "the evil committed by one member can diminish the life of the whole clan"²² Bujo also has to emphasise the community contribution to the well-being of an individual person. The relationship between the community and individual persons in it must be reciprocal.

The members of an African community include the living and the living dead, the ancestors. From this conception of life in the com-

20. Bujo, "Can Morality be Christian in Africa?", 9.

21. Bujo, *African Christian Morality at the Age of Inculturation*, 98. See Todd M. Vanden Berg, "Culture, Christianity, and Witchcraft in a West African Context", in Lamin Sanneh and Joel A. Carpenter (eds.), *The Changing Face of Christianity: Africa, West, and the World*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) 45-62. Berg states: "Various scholars have noted a lack of acceptance for personal sin within the African Christian context. This may be due to a fundamental difference between Christianity and traditional African religious systems. Christianity acknowledges personal responsibility for sin, whereas traditional African beliefs externalize the origin of bad occurrences. M. C. Kirwen disagrees. He believes that African traditional religious systems maintain personal responsibility for immoral or evil activities..." (p. 57). See M. C. Kirwen, *The Missionary and the Diviner: Contending Theologies of Christian and African Religions* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1987) 53.

22. Bujo, *African Christian Morality at the Age of Inculturation*, 7. See also Juvénal Ilunga Muya, "Bénézet Bujo: The Awakening of a Systematic and Authentically African Thought", in *African Theology in the 21st Century*, Vol. 1, 107-149.

munity, Bujo writes: "Not only does what happens to the living concern them but our attitudes and acts can strengthen or diminish the life of the dead. Negatively, our acts can be an offence to our ancestors."²³ This distinctive cultural emphasis, however, should not obscure the principle that the well being of the community of the living should be the primary concern in an African ethics, especially on issues of life preservation.

Reconciling individuality and communal existence is not as straightforward as Bujo sometimes makes out it to be. Individuality implies uniqueness and separateness, while community living implies "the loss or lessening" of individuality. Community as in "communion" implies a joining of lives or an understanding that people are described through relationships rather than in solitary existence. According to Bujo, the community aspect of morality does not deny individual moral responsibility but affirms it. For example:

For many black Africans, the giving of a name is not only a rite of defense and protection; but it bears an action, a message, and holds a program of life which each one has to realize individually and not by proxy... the name indicates the historicity of each one in his singularity and in his incommunicable and unrepeatable uniqueness.²⁴

We can certainly say that in the African understanding, there is no individual without the community and there is no community without individual human persons. Hence, it is understandable when Theo Sundermeier says "The relationship of the human being to the community goes further than community life. It involves interdependence: people, animals and environment exchange their strength, and are in a relationship of osmosis."²⁵ Every person is supposed to contribute to the well-being and the maintenance of these relationships. A well founded theology of the ecology or environment can be based on this understanding of relationship between human beings among themselves and their environment as a whole. It is only by contributing to this harmonious co-existence that a human person realises the fullness of being human. Sundermeier sums this up when he writes: "As a deliberate antithesis to Descartes and to existentialism, J. V. Taylor produced the formula: '*participio ergo sum*' – I participate, therefore I am."²⁶

23. Bujo, "Can Morality Be Christian in Africa?", 8.

24. Bujo, "Can Morality Be Christian in Africa?", 9.

25. Sundermeier, *The Individual and Community in African Traditional Religions*, 18.

26. Sundermeier, *The Individual and Community in African Traditional Religions*, 19. See Elizabeth Isichei on contextual nature of inculturation: "A practical problem in the

IV. THE POSSIBILITY OF INDIVIDUAL FREEDOM
IN AN AFRICAN COMMUNITY ETHIC

The extent to which the community shapes human living in an African context raises the problem, as pointed out previously, of whether individual personal freedom is possible. Bujo presents moral responsibility in individual persons as flowing from their obligation to the community. In his work the question of whether individual persons go through the process of ethical decision-making seems not to be adequately addressed. The community, from this perspective, has already laid down moral norms on what is to be done and what is to be avoided. Bujo has argued that in an African setting, individual freedom is a reality but it is not absolute. He is of the opinion that sometimes the individual has to obey the dictates of the community without being convinced. Bujo states:

Individual conscience is not the last chance without a common listening to each other; the “conscience” of the community might eventually be the last instance for individual action, because one does not feel cheated by the community.... If an action is embedded in the community of the living and of the dead, and is at least implicitly a common decision, then everybody has to have a share in the heroic deeds as well as in the past guilt of the clan community – the ancestors included. In this way conscience becomes a “memory conscience”, which does not only have a claim on one’s individual freedom, but is rather a form of conscience, which assumes responsibility for an individual’s own decisions as well as those of the community.²⁷

There is however the danger of conformity for the sake of doing what the community requires. Somehow, if this understanding of conscience and freedom were taken to the extreme uncurbed, individual autonomy would seem to be at risk.

indigenization of liturgy lies in the fact that this must necessarily take place in terms of a specific language and culture, and is not easy to apply to the polyglot cities” (*A History of Christianity in Africa: From Antiquity to the Present* [Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1995] 331).

27. Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community*, 75-6. Bujo’s view of ethics as measured by the communal good contrasts with Immanuel Kant’s categorical imperative: “nothing is left but the conformity of actions as such with universal law, which alone is to serve the will as its principle, that is, I ought never to act except in such a way that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law” (Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. and edited by Mary Gregor [New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998] 14-15). According to Kant, the source of ethics is the human subject with capacity for moral deliberation.

However, the point to keep in mind, according to Bujo, is that the community facilitates the possibility of individual freedom. "The individual has to contribute to communal freedom. One is free only if one's becoming free promotes freedom within the community. Therefore, one does not become free outside the community but within it and through it."²⁸ To argue against individual personal freedom seems to remove the foundation of morality. Although Bujo gives prevalence to community than to individual freedom, it is imperative for any ethical theory to emphasise the inviolability of individual freedom and thereby individual human dignity. Community does not exist in the abstract, but through the individual persons who are constituent members.

In addition, Bujo also realises the problem connected with a communal replacement of personal individual freedom. He has suggested the factor that ensures that individual freedom is not abolished by the community, or vice versa, as dialogue between members of the community. It is in the context of dialogue that Bujo has written that "it is important in this model of palaver that everybody's word be accompanied by the critical words of others, so that the power of the word may not be misused".²⁹ This also shows that there are no abstract norms but that there is always a need for moral decision-making in a particular context.³⁰ There are no moral decisions ready-made.

It is in Bujo's analysis of individual freedom and its relation to the community, that he further asks and answers the question: "What then is conscience from an African perspective? It is about talking with and listening to one another."³¹ In this context of dialogue in moral decision-making, the power of the word is seen as promoting the life of all people in the community. Fullness of life is realised in community.³²

After showing how individual freedom relates to the community, Bujo can be seen to be moving towards a communitarian-ecclesial model of conscience. He says that, "If the traditional doctrine of conscience is analyzed in greater detail, then it becomes apparent that the inter-subjective dimension is implicitly present."³³ Further, Bujo holds, "The individual Church member is moved by the Holy Spirit for the sake of all and is obliged to place the given gift at the service of his neighbor."³⁴

28. Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community*, 74.

29. Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community*, 77.

30. See Joseph Arntz, "Natural Law and its History", in *Concilium* 5 (1965) 39-57.

31. Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community*, 78.

32. Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community*, 79.

33. Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community*, 80.

34. Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community*, 80-81.

He makes references to the view of St Thomas Aquinas that an individual can correct even the highest authority in the church, if an error exists.³⁵ Bujo clearly shows that the community and the individual are mutually related. The individual human person has freedom in the community. The community provides an enabling environment for individual self-determination. Hence, the individual and the community are part and parcel of the same whole.

V. PALAVER AS A WAY OF RECONCILING INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNAL MORAL NORMS

To highlight the moral agency of individual persons in community, Bujo presents palaver as a participatory dialogical process. Palaver is viewed as a discernment process leading to the formulation of communal moral norms through active participation of individual persons. Moral norms embody moral values to be realised in human conduct. My concern here is not to enter into the debate on the objectivity or subjectivity of moral norms, or even about negative or positive moral norms, but to evaluate how Bujo views moral norms in an African context.³⁶

Moral norms are viewed by Bujo as realised in an African setting through dialogue between members of the community. So conceived, moral norms do not claim any finality or absoluteness; they are always open to new development or improvement, a process which, for Bujo, takes place in palaver. Palaver is a dialogue in the decision-making process where issues of importance affecting the community are discussed. It is not superfluous talk but an efficient institutionalisation of communicative action. Palaver addresses people's existential interests, often to the smallest detail. It requires people to share their experiences and also to refer to the entire history of the clan community.³⁷

In a concrete way, the concept of palaver in an African context points to the dynamic dialogue between a people and their culture. Moral norms are realized through palaver but they are always open to change. The Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe also presents African peoples as continually in dialogue with their culture, and hence their culture is always evolving into new ways of living. Achebe describes the dynamic nature of palaver as follows:

35. Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community*, 81.

36. For an analysis of moral norms, see Richard M. Gula, *What are They Saying about Moral Norms?* (New York: Paulist, 1982). See also James J. Walter, "The Foundation and Formulations of Norms", in *Moral Theology: Challenges for the Future*, 125-54.

37. Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community*, 36.

So while the African intellectual was busy displaying the past culture of Africa, the troubled peoples of Africa were already creating new revolutionary cultures which took into account their present conditions. As long as people are changing, their culture will be changing. The only place where culture is static, and exists independently of people, is the museum, and this is not an African institution.³⁸

Similarly, Bujo presents palaver as a practical way in moral decision-making. Palaver is a kind of a moral clearing-ground where a community or an individual consults one another on ethical issues. Bujo indicates palaver takes place not only at the macro-ethical level, but also and with the same intensity at the micro-ethical level.³⁹ The palaver-community “as an ‘ideal community of communication’ is not only cultivated where a general ethical principle affects the well-being of the people as a whole, but also where individual action makes traditional rules uncertain in view of a new context of life”.⁴⁰

Palaver opens up in a community the possibility of creating a new tradition.⁴¹ Norms can be and have to be found in a communal manner – hence free of domination and in dialogue. Bujo holds that the African palaver model is close to the European approach called the “ethics of discourse”.⁴² He refers in this connection to Karl-Otto Apel’s “ethics of discourse” as the “ethics of solidary responsibility of all those who are able to argue, on all problems that can be discussed”.⁴³ Communicative ethics or ethics of discourse, according to Seyla Benhabib, derive from modern theories of autonomy and of the social contract, as articulated by John Locke, Jean Jacques Rousseau, and in particular by Immanuel Kant. Valid norms are conceived only as a result of engaging in certain argumentative practices and achieving the people’s consent. From Apel, Benhabib refers to these argumentative practices as an “ideal community of communication” (*die ideale Kommunikationsgemeinschaft*) and

38. Bernth Lindfors et al. (eds.), “Interview with Chinua Achebe”, *Palaver: Interviews with Five African Writers in Texas* (Austin TX: The University of Texas, 1972) 5-12, see pp. 5-6.

39. Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community*, 36.

40. Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community*, 36.

41. Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community*, 36-7. Palaver can also be applicable to inter-religious dialogue. For example, see Kwame Bediako, “Christian Witness in the Public Sphere: Some Lessons and Residual Challenges from the Recent Political History of Ghana”, in *The Changing Face of Christianity*, 118-32. He writes, “the long tradition of hospitality and tolerance that African primal religions have maintained in their meeting with the missionary religions of Christianity and Islam must qualify them to contribute substantially to the quest for inter-religious dialogue and harmony” (p. 123).

42. Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community*, 37.

43. Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community*, 37.

from Habermas as “practical discourses”.⁴⁴ In an ethics of discourse, as well as in an African palaver, there is a concern of equality of chances for all partners. In the ethics of discourse, only those able to argue reasonably participate, and it is these that care for the interests of all illiterate or uneducated people or those who are not yet intellectually mature.⁴⁵

However, Bujo distinguishes an African ethic from discourse ethics. Of an African ethic, he says “the human being does not become human by *cogito* (thinking) but by *relatio* (relationship) and *cognatio* (kinship). As noted above, the fundamental principle of this ethics is not *cogito ergo sum* (I think, so I am), but rather, *cognatus sum ergo sum* (I am related, so I am)”.⁴⁶ In the African palaver, the relationship is not basically about thought or theory, but about human beings and their well-being. African palaver is concerned basically with fostering good human relations, a priority to which all ethical norms should adhere. The rightness or the wrongness of an ethical decision depends on how much it fosters the common good.⁴⁷

Bujo also distinguishes the African community ethic from the ethics of discourse on the level of involvement in the making of moral norms. In an African palaver all people are involved, while in the ethics of discourse a few select elite and professionals participate. “The ethics of discourse refers to the real process of coming to mutual understanding within an unlimited ‘ideal’ community of communication, as sole instance of legitimization where every participant who is able to discuss is convinced that his statements are valid and can be generalized.”⁴⁸

Bujo is critical of such ethics of discourse because of its attempt to provide solid foundations for universal norms and deontological validity. He suggests that the ethics of discourse ignores the conflict between “objective and subjective” which is common in traditional morality. Further, Bujo argues that by concentrating on “right” or “wrong”, the ethical model of discourse strives to avoid the “naturalistic” as well as the “ethnocentric fallacy”. Hence, he views the

44. Seyla Benhabib, “Afterword: Communicative Ethics and Current Controversies in Practical Philosophy”, in Seyla Benhabib and Fred R. Dallmayr (eds.), *The Communicative Ethics Controversy* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1990) 330-31.

45. Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community*, 40.

46. Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community*, 54.

47. On the common good and personal good, see Michael Novak, *Free Persons and the Common Good* (New York: Madison Books, 1989). Novak presents a Christian understanding of personal good and communal good as one. He states, “God is the universal common good not only of humans but of all created things” (p. 30). See David Hollenbach, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), where he argues that shared humanity is a basis for global values and human rights (see p. 219).

48. Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community*, 49.

ethics of discourse as an ethics of rules which moves around what is morally right.⁴⁹ For him, the power of moral judgement is never explicit from the start; consequently, it cannot be bound to a “catalogue of rules”, even if this were to be a voluminous catalogue. The reason is that moral power of judgement is essentially based on *phronesis* (prudence).⁵⁰

In terms of participation in the norm-making process, Bujo is also critical of the selective representation involved in the discourse ethics. It is only the elite that participates in the ethics of discourse. He states: “The discourse ethics seems to be elite-oriented and discriminatory since only reason matters. One can only discuss with those who are capable of arguing rationally. In this way, the ethics of discourse remains loyal to the Western tradition of *cogito*, which seeks to define the human person solely through reason.”⁵¹ In the preceding, Bujo is critical of Karl-Otto Apel’s basic premise which is as follows: “We now can again ascertain that we, in serious argumentation, together with a *meaning-claim* and a *truth-claim*, also presupposes a morally relevant rightness-claim tied up with our acts of argumentation as acts of communication.”⁵² In Apel’s discourse ethics there is an element of morality that is pre-given, just as language is shared by various people.

Despite Bujo’s critical analysis of the ethics of discourse, he shares Apel’s view that people are always in a particular context (a community of communication). In this his ethical thought has some connection also with that of Hans-Georg Gadamer, who holds that human understanding and experience of the world are language-bound.⁵³ According to Seyla Benhabib, Gadamer in his work turned to Aristotle’s model of *phronesis* as a form of contextually embedded and situationally sensitive judgement of particulars and practical reason.⁵⁴ Hence, Bujo’s African ethics also shares with Apel and Gadamer the view that human understanding takes place in a historical context.

Whereas, however, the ethics of discourse adopts *phronesis*, which is concerned with the “good life” and prefers the factual *status quo*, Bujo has put forward palaver as an alternate ethical process providing an open way for the improvement of moral norms. In offering a continuous engagement with ethical issues affecting a community palaver meets the

49. Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community*, 49.

50. Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community*, 50.

51. Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community*, 55.

52. Karl-Otto Apel, *The Response of Discourse Ethics to the Moral Challenge of the Human Situation as Such and Especially Today* (Leuven: Peeters, 2001) 71

53. Hans-Georg Gadamer, “The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem”, in Gayle L. Ormiston and Alan D. Schrift (eds.), *The Hermeneutic Tradition: From Ast to Ricoeur* (Albany NY: State University of New York, 1990) 147-58, see p.157-58.

54. Benhabib, “Afterword”, 333.

need to provide a critical interpretation of the existing law and of the given situation.⁵⁵

In addition, Bujo applies palaver to an African Christian ethic by calling for dialogue among African Christians in order that ethical norms may be formulated from their day-to-day decisions. This ensures that moral norms are not dictated from outside the community but from within. Palaver, according to Bujo, should foster in African Christianity a spirit of working to eliminate alienating situations of oppression and suffering caused by poverty and disease. In the context of solidarity with the poor and suffering, as part of Christian memory of the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, palaver aligns itself with the liberation method in Christian theology.⁵⁶

The process of finding authority and ethical norms in the context of palaver as advocated by Bujo rests in the way people conduct their lives from day to day. The method thus offers a model for ethical argumentation in a multi-cultural world. He writes:

Traditions and cultures are the *prima instrumenta laboris* (the primary working instruments), which provoke argumentation and which facilitate understanding among all cultures. Whenever something is regarded as the product of a given culture and seeks universality, it must not enforce its claim of validity without dialogue with other contexts and peoples. Universal validity has to be proven by confrontation with other people's forms of thought. If one takes dialogue and discussion with other traditions seriously, then universalization can only be achieved in a contextual way.⁵⁷

While this intercultural theological method advocated by Bujo incorporates natural moral law reasoning, he is concerned that moral arguments drawn from the theory of the natural law reasoning be immanent to a cultural context, avoiding untenable universalization of moral norms.⁵⁸ He notes that "The model of Aristotelico-Thomistic morality depends on the principle of 'a good life' (*eu zên*)". St Thomas sums this up with the basic principle: "Good is to be done and striven

55. Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community*, 51-2. The ethics of discourse as presented by Bujo seems to miss here what Gadamer called the historical importance (or effective history) a person attaches to any instance in the process of interpretation. In palaver, there also could be a problem of domination or preference for some particular moral opinion. See Hans-George Gadamer, "Truth and Method", in *The Hermeneutic Tradition: From Ast to Ricoeur*, 198-212, see p. 206-207.

56. Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community*, 41. See Wilson M. Maina, "An African Christian Ethic as a Liberation Ethic in the Theology of Bénézet Bujo", in *African Christian Studies* 22 (2006) 5-28.

57. Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community*, 52-3.

58. Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community*, 43.

after, evil is to be avoided" (*bonum est faciendum et prosequendum, et malum vitandum*).⁵⁹ But, since natural law reasoning presupposes universality in moral reasoning, the synchronisation of such reasoning with a cultural context creates some tension. Bujo, however, is highly critical of monolithic views in ethics where one way of thinking dominates the whole world in ethical matters. He maintains that there are several ethical models that have equal validity alongside western or classical-based ethical systems. Bujo, as indicated, presents palaver as such an alternate model, one in which a communal and dialogue-oriented dimension will replace a universalized and deontological ethics, and even the one-sided Western emphasis on the *cogito*. In a multicultural and polycentric world, Bujo has argued for diversity in ethical approaches.⁶⁰

FINAL REMARKS: CRITIQUE AND EVALUATION

This study has presented an African ethics, seen in the work of Bénézet Bujo, as one where life in community is paramount, where human persons realise themselves as individuals through the community, and where individuality finds expression through the palaver. In the palaver differing views on community life are reconciled and individuals are given an opportunity to participate in the process of moral discernment. However, it should be pointed out that in many African communities today the historical context presumed by Bujo's palaver is one of yesteryear. Many contemporary African communities do not have the cultural and social structures presupposed in his work. Historical change brought about especially through western education and civilisation has led to the introduction of an individualism previously absent in Africa. This is especially evident in major African cities today. For example, a visit to Nairobi city in Kenya presents one with a metropolitan perspective common to cities elsewhere in the world.

Apart from historical variance, Bujo's work also fails to acknowledge diversity in traditional African communities. African ethnic groups differ through independent languages (not just dialects), culture, and history. For example, the Maasai people of East Africa are completely distinct in their way of life from the Gikuyu people of the same region. The theological method of Bujo has generalised a view of the African people as a whole, leading him to posit an African ethics in the singular instead of recognising a plurality of ethical systems, as would seem to be

59. Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community*, 44.

60. Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community*, 57.

required by the size of the African continent and the diversity of its multiple ethnic groups.⁶¹ On this point, Bujo's work falls into the category of many African scholars who argue for a singular African theology or philosophy.⁶²

Further, Bujo does not indicate how palaver addresses the exclusion of women in decision-making in many African traditional communities. Historically, it is known that councils of elders in many African ethnic groups were constituted of men, with women considered not fit to participate. Contemporary African women scholars, theologians especially, have raised concern over issues of equality, inclusiveness, and participation in African societies.⁶³ Bujo has not shown how palaver ethical theory deals with gender discrimination and other cultural practices affecting women in African communities.

On a more positive note, although Bujo limits palaver within the confines of a particular community, in contemporary Africa it should be extended beyond the confines of a single community or ethnic group to address relations between the various groups that constitute African nations. It is a method that can be used to promote peace and harmony with others outside any immediate African community. Dialogue (palaver) between warring ethnic groups could serve to resolve the internal conflicts which have caused horrendous suffering in so many African countries.

To conclude, African communitarian ethics provides an alternate moral theory. It highlights the community's role in the development of its moral norms. An individual human person, though a moral person in an African traditional context, is inseparable from the community. The moral process is ultimately a communal affair. This community dimension in ethics is an important aspect that African ethics as presented in this essay can offer to other ethical systems such as the western subjectivist ethics. African ethics can also act as a corrective to the natural moral law tradition as well as help bring renewal to Christian ethics as developed in various western traditions. Toward this

61. See the statement by Isichei: "African Christendom, like Africa in general, is divided by language barriers. Indeed, one of the most lasting and pernicious results of colonialism is its division of Africa into English-, French-, and Portuguese-speaking countries. These divisions go deeper than language." (*A History of Christianity in Africa*, 332).

62. Wilson M. Maina, "The Foundations of African Christian Theologies: African Traditional Religions(s) and African Historical and Cultural Contexts", in *African Christian Studies* 23 (2007) 63-94.

63. Gender equality is one of the key issues raised in the work of the so-called "The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians" such as Elizabeth Amoah (ed.), *Where God Reigns: Reflection on Women in God's World* (Accra, Ghana: Sam Woode, 1997) and also Mercy Amba Oduyoye (ed.), *Transforming Power: Women in the Household of God* (Accra, Ghana: Sam Woode, 1997). Isichei notes that women are a majority in African churches but are excluded in governing structures (*A History of Christianity in Africa*, 333).

end, the practice of palaver, contrary to a governing or teaching authority handing out universalised moral prescriptions or dictates from above, grounds the source of moral norms from below by promoting peoples' participation in the process. Palaver thereby promotes an understanding of the developing or open nature of moral norms, counteracting claims to moral absoluteness. In this respect, Bujo's work can be said to make a contribution not only to African ethics but also to ethics in general.