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African Ethics and Online Communities: An Argument for a Virtual Communitarianism

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Abstract

A virtual community is generally described as a group of people with shared interests, ideas, and goals in a particular digital group or virtual platform. Virtual communities have become ubiquitous in recent times, and almost everyone belongs to one or multiple virtual communities. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, with its associated national lockdowns, has made virtual communities more essential and a necessary part of our daily lives, whether for work and business, educational purposes or keeping in touch with friends and family. Given these facts, how do we ensure that virtual communities become a true community qua community? We address this question by proposing and arguing for a ‘virtual communitarianism’—an online community that integrates essential features of traditional African communitarianism in its outlook and practice. The paper’s position is that virtual communitarianism can make for a strong ethical virtual community where members can demonstrate a strong sense of group solidarity, care and compassion towards each other. The inclusion of these virtues can bring members who often are far apart and help create a stronger community bond. This will ensure that the evolution of virtual communities does not happen without the integration of progressive African communitarian values.

Keywords: African ethics, Online communities, African communitarianism, Virtual communitarianism

Introduction

Some people perceive the rapid technological growth on the African continent as a cause for significant concern. Abanyam, for instance, laments that not all Western technologies are hospitable or agree with African ontology or vision. His disquiet lies in the fact that some of what he calls, Western technologies, have contributed to the deterioration of esteemed African cultural values

(2013, 26). Whereas Abanyam's abhorrence for Western technologies may be valid in some respect (for there are indeed observable evidence to the fact that some traditional values are losing their essence due to the influence of Western technologies), the technologies that facilitate virtual communities need not be regarded as a danger to traditional African cultural values and practices. Virtual communities can facilitate and augment prevailing African values and practices, but doing so will require a deliberate and concerted effort.

Virtual communities have become ubiquitous such that almost everyone belongs to one or multiple communities. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, with its associated national lockdowns, has made digital communities more essential and a necessary part of our daily lives, whether for work and businesses, educational purposes, religious purposes, social or political activism, or just keeping in touch with friends and family. Although 'real' or geophysical communities and virtual communities share some similar attributes, there are notable differences. For example, while people are born into an already existing geophysical community, the same cannot be said of virtual communities. Individuals join virtual communities of their choosing, and they are more often than not relatively easier to join or leave. Again, unlike geophysical communities, digital communities need not have a physical location or address. There is no material edifice, and its members need not have regular or any face-to-face interaction. Nevertheless, it is possible for a community to exist geo-physically and also online, as in, for example, the creation of a digital platform for a particular neighbourhood to share ideas and decide on projects or workers of a particular company forming an online group to discuss work-related issues. In this regard, and perhaps more, we can say that there sometimes exists an interconnection between virtual and geophysical communities, whereby one supplements the other.

It may be argued that traditional geophysical communities have a stronger sense of bonding and belonging, more especially on the African continent, where much of traditional community life exists due to regular physical interaction. There is also no denying the fast-growing popularity of virtual communities in Africa, with Africa's budding youth making up a large chunk of their membership. Cobigo, Martin, and Mcheimech point out that understanding what it means to be a community has advanced and transformed with the progression of human interactions and behaviours (2016, 183). Thus, we are of the view that virtual community is the next stage in this community transformation. It is, therefore, essential to focus on these emerging virtual communities in Africa and how to consolidate them through the incorporation of values found within traditional African communitarianism that have been the backbone of traditional communities in Africa. In other words, the paper assesses how aspects of traditional African communitarian ethics can be incorporated into existing and emerging digital communities in what we call virtual communitarianism. This is mostly missing in the literature, which tends

to rather speak more on how to make online communities more user friendly, accessible or better designed, or how businesses can use them to gain a competitive advantage (see, for example, LAZAR and PREECE 1998; FISHER 2018).

To achieve its objective, the paper will from here explore the notions of community and virtual digital community. This will be followed by a brief exposition of some of the main features of traditional African communitarianism and ethics. These will pave the way for the argument for virtual communitarianism. The paper is a theoretical analysis and, as such, relies essentially on already existing literature.

Defining Community

An online community, web community, internet community, virtual community, or digital community is a complex notion to define. The difficulty here lies essentially in the open nature of the word community. As Constance Elise Porter (2004) notes, the word 'community' can have different meanings for different individuals, making it difficult to come to a single universally accepted definition. Indeed, Porter intimates that there is possibly close to one hundred definitions of community out there. Interestingly, the only common thing found among all of these different understanding of community is the word *people* (COBIGO, MARTIN, and MCHEIMECH 2016). Diaz (2000) describes community as a concept with a messy history and notes that many social scientists have resorted to disregarding the concept as an ideological mystification due to the numerous complications it faces in defining it. Irrespective of the many conceptions of community out there, it is apparent that 'community' goes beyond a mere amalgamation of individuals. The meaning and scope of the concept of community is not static but rapidly expanding. With the advent of digital platforms, the notion of community has expanded beyond what we already know.

In their review of forty publications, Cobigo, Martin and Mcheimech (2016) discovered some common themes that run through the various definitions of community. Among these themes is the idea of *physical proximity*, which they claim is expressed in terms of "neighbourhood and geographical location." (2016, 189) Related to the theme of physical proximity is the term *bounded*, which they explained as indicating boundaries that separate one community from another. This understanding of community which identifies a group as a community based on its geophysical location, physical territory or boundaries, makes sense for a geophysical community like the Akan community in Ghana or the Zulu community in South Africa. In this sense, we can locate the said community on a map. However, this notion of community is not without its challenge because, as Bartle (2010) correctly points out, a community is not just the individuals found within that geographical territory at a particular point in time.

A community's membership may include others who, although not physically present within the geographical location at a particular point in time, identify themselves with the group and may have temporarily moved to other locations either to return or never to return. Thus, Porter notes that the notion of community entails "both something structural (e.g., a bounded location) and something socio-psychological (e.g., a sense of shared values developed through interaction with members)" (2014, n.p). These two features, i.e., structural and socio-psychological, we suppose, must go together in the traditional sense of community (that is, a community identifiable by the geographical space it is found). Nevertheless, it will appear that socio-physical attributes that involve a sense of shared values developed through meaningful interactions among members hold a community together even beyond a physical territory. Thus, although a physical territory can deliver values such as a high sense of belonging among members and even facilitate regular interaction among members, these values are not to be automatically found, if the individual members do not make the effort required to create them.

Another theme identified in Cobigo, Martin and Mcheimech's project is the use of the terminologies, *shared ties*, *common interests*, and *common identity* in some definitions of community. These terminologies tend to suggest that a community qua community is one that members believe in and uphold and in which they share certain common traits that they hold in high esteem, reverence and respect. Thus, to be a community member would suggest that the individual generally subscribes to these shared ties, interests, identity, values, beliefs, practices, and philosophies. They must hold the group's ideologies, doctrines, dogmas, norms, objectives, goals, aspirations, dreams, vision, and mission as valid and actual. A related theme here is the *sense of belonging*, that feeling of strong affiliation that community members have towards the community or group. With this sense of belonging, members feel accepted and connected to the group emotionally, intellectually, spiritually, among others depending on the group's purpose and function. Understanding community in this sense does not require a community to be physically located. We can speak of a community of liberal philosophers or socialist political theorists in this regard.

A third and striking theme that Cobigo, Martin and Mcheimech's (2016) review of existing literature on the notion of community revealed is the frequent reference to some *regular interaction among members* of a said community. Of course, this should not be surprising because it will be bizarre to think of a community with no interactions among members. Interactions, by way of communication and exchange of ideas, keep fellowship in any community alive. Interactions coagulate interconnectedness and the sense of belongingness. These interactions accentuate another identifiable theme by the authors within the various understandings of community, namely; the suggestion that a sense of community must include a show of support such as

solidarity, cooperation, and assistance. These are very crucial features of any active community for without them, a community would be latent and lifeless. Members of a community work together in achieving their common objective. They show solidarity with each other and offer their services to the group when required.

Some have compared the community to a living creature, consisting of diverse components with distinctive roles, activities, or interests, each operating within specific boundaries to meet community needs (CLINICAL AND TRANSLATIONAL SCIENCE AWARDS CONSORTIUM 2011). Similarly, Bartle (2010), again, urges us to consider a community as a sort of well-organized living organism. According to him, a community remains alive even though its human members come and go, are born or die. The analogy made between a community and a living creature or organism is an important one because it underscores the continuous functioning roles community members must play to keep the community alive. Thus, just as a living creature requires food and water to keep alive, so must a community maintain its bond to stay alive.

On Virtualness

Although much of the literature focuses on geographical location or proximity in their community classification, others acknowledge the emergence of a borderless community held together not by their shared territory but by their shared common interests. These shared interests may include but are not limited to dating (as you may find on Tinder), employment or professional interests, religious, and even old students associations and alumni. These communities' existence is made possible through virtual or social platforms powered by the internet. Members of these online community groups join and connect regardless of geographical location. Cobigo, Martin and Mcheimech (2016) describe such a community as *a territory-free web-based community* or virtual community.

Porter defines a virtual community as “an aggregation of individuals or business partners who interact around a shared interest, where the interaction is at least partially supported or mediated by technology and guided by some protocols or norms” (2004, np). This definition highlights three significant features of a virtual or digital community; 1. There is the interaction of members 2. These members have shared interests, which is what brings and binds them together, and 3. The use of technology facilitates the community's existence and function. As acknowledged by Porter, although virtual communities are aided by technology, they need not be entirely web-based. Virtual communities can have unequal degrees of ‘virtualness’. In what she also describes as fluid communities, Porter explains that digital community members may choose to interact through face-to-face encounters or the use of technology.

Porter further identifies what she calls two first-level categories of a virtual community, i.e. member-initiated and organization-sponsored virtual communities. By member-initiated communities, she means such virtual communities that are established by and remain managed by members. By organization-sponsored communities, she refers to digital communities that are established by either commercial or non-commercial organizations. For this paper's purpose, reference to a virtual community will not apply to organizational-sponsored virtual communities. Thus, the paper's proposal for virtual communitarianism may not apply directly to a business-oriented virtual community whose sole aim is to expand its customer base for profit or use the community as a channel for the advertisement of products and services. As Porter admits, content is less social in these business-oriented or organization-sponsored virtual communities due to the community's commercial orientation. The paper's proposal for virtual communitarianism is more directed to what could be described as member-initiated digital communities, which are more social in their orientation and mimic some aspects of geophysical communities, such as having common shared interests, social relationships, and some form of common identity.

Virtual communities need not be all formal. Quite a number of them are informal or semi-formal. While some have stipulated goals, mission and vision, the vast majority of these communities either do not have any clear goals and missions or their missions are not officially stipulated, although they may be implicitly or tacitly assumed. Some virtual communities have well-defined leaders with well-defined portfolios, while others do not. Again, some of these online communities are meant to be temporal, while others are permanent. Some permanent communities have fixed and permanent membership, while others, although permanent, do not have permanent or fixed membership. Thus, the dynamics of a virtual community can vary.

An important distinctive feature of a digital community that set it apart from geophysical communities is the fact that it is possible that all the members of a digital community may never have seen each other or will never see each other physically or in person. What binds them together is more of what Porter (2004) had described earlier as socio-psychological, that is, their shared interest. This shared interest facilitates the group's interaction and makes the community worthwhile. One need not relocate to join a digital community as one may do for a geophysical community. Instead, one only needs access to the internet and membership can be conferred based on the community's terms and conditions.

It may be argued that constant physical interaction is vital for establishing community bonds and solidarity, and as such, geophysical communities will have an advantage over virtual communities. This can be granted; however, what virtual communities lack in physical interactions, they

more than compensate for in a stronger shared interest. This is because virtual community members are not automatic members of their group by virtue of birthplace or place of settlement. They join these communities on their own due to the groups' appealing socio-psychological factors. Hence, they are expected to have a higher sense of belonging, participation, and engagement.

The technology for creating and sustaining online communities has become easier to use, far accessible and more convenient, hence contributing to the growing widespread popularity of digital communities. Of course, this is augmented by the fast-changing city lifestyle that does not afford city dwellers much time on their hands for physical gathering and socialization as frequently as they may wish. With virtual communities, members can connect using applications like Yammer, webinars, discussion forums, blogs, and other online social media spaces such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram in the comfort of their home, while in transit or anywhere else they find themselves. The only things needed are a working internet and a smartphone or computer.

Online communities also can be more participatory and engaging since every member can equally be a content creator directly and instantly, advance their views on matters of concern and directly take part in votes and debates without the need for representatives. Similarly, since information shared is received directly by all members almost simultaneously, members are more readily informed than members who are part of geophysical communities. These advantages of virtual communities allow members to learn from each other and promote community participation and involvement.

Since geographical boundaries do not limit them, virtual communities often tend to be more multi-cultural and diverse. This, of course, can have both positive and negative impacts on the community's overall function. Nevertheless, when well-managed, these features can be harnessed for the overall benefit of the group. There is the danger of having a multiplicity of group interests within such a virtual community with different interests other than the overarching group interest. This can become destructive and a nuisance in the group. This feature is often the hallmark of large virtual communities. This notwithstanding, scholars like Storchi (2015) believe that the size of the community in terms of their membership ought not to be a drawback on virtual communities insofar as engagement is sustained. This is because the strength of virtual communities lies in their 'human-to-human connection' and their capacity to initiate content of interests to their members.

African Communitarianism and Ethics

Communitarianism

African societies are communitarian, and even though the different communities are not homogenous, they share similar ideology, values, and practices in many ways. Within this communitarian system, more emphasis is placed on the community than on individuals. In describing the communal nature of the African society, Coetzee and Roux (1998, 320) explains that it is:

A group of persons linked by interpersonal bonds, biological and/or nonbiological, who consider themselves primarily as members of the group and who have common interests, goals and values. The notion of common interest and values is crucial to an adequate conception of community, the notion in fact defines the community. It is the notion of common interest, goals and values that differentiate a community from a mere association of individual persons. Members of a community share goals and values. They have intellectual and ideological, as well as emotional, attachment to those goals and values; as long as they cherish them, they are ready to peruse and defend them.

To Coetzee and Roux, a communal society is where individuals share and are guided by a common set of goals and values. Therefore, to be an accepted member of this community or deemed a 'person' in this community, one must have certain qualities and attain specific standards laid down by the group. Being communal suggests a communion of souls in which the individual is considered part and parcel of the community (SENGHOR 1964, 24). Importance is given to individuals' responsibilities towards the community as opposed to individual rights. Hence, the community takes precedence over the individual. Senghor affirms that "Negro-African societies put more emphasis on the group than on the individual, more on the solidarity than on the activity and needs of the individual, more on the communion of persons than on their autonomy. Ours is a community society" (1964, 93-94). So, rather than highlighting individuality, African communitarian societies place more importance on the community.

Discussions on the individual's place within the African communitarian society continue to be topical among most African philosophers and ethicists. Three schools of thought have emerged out of these discussions, namely radical, moderate and limited communitarianism. Scholars such as Mbiti (1970), Tempels (1959), Menkiti (1984), and Senghor (1964) are among those who hold the radical communitarian view that the reality of the African communal world ought to take precedence over the reality of the individual's life and choices. To these philosophers, defining the individual in reference to the community suggests that the individual acquires 'personhood' not at birth but much later in life, and depending on his or her relationship with the community. It is the position of Mbiti (1970) that an individual from a communitarian background has no existence outside the community because the community defines him or her. This school of thought is what Gyekye (1997) refers to as radical communitarianism.

In objecting to the radical communitarian view, Gyekye (1997) and Eze (2008) proposed what they call moderate communitarianism. This view emphasizes that there is an interrelationship between the individuals in the community. For Eze, the individual and the community co-exist (2008, 386). The argument behind moderate communitarianism is that it was proposed to bring a sense of balance between the influence of community and individual independence. According to Gyekye “moderate communitarianism aims to ascribe to both the community and the individual an equal moral standing” (1997, 41). It suggests that rights and responsibilities have equal status and that the community does not take priority over the rights of an individual. Matolino, on the other hand, raises a concern on both radical and moderate communitarianism, and argues for what he calls limited communitarianism. To him, the individual in both radical and moderate communitarianism is not given the attention he or she deserves. He believes that the individual ought to take precedence over the community (2014, 161). He affirms that “individuals are entities and that they are worthy of respect as a creation of God and one whose identity proceeds from God” (MATOLINO 2014, 161).

The paper does not intend to extend or do an elaborate discussion on the role or extent of community in the lives of the individual in traditional African communitarian societies. For this paper, whether African communitarianism is described as radical, moderate, or limited, the crucial thing here is that traditional African societies place emphasis on group bonding and an active community life.

The Ethics of Communitarianism

As noted earlier, sharing community life suggests that the community shares several principles and values, and adherence is prominent. Some of these shared principles and values within the communitarian setting include the following, “*Ubuntu*, charity, honesty, hospitality, generosity, loyalty, truthfulness, solidarity, and respect for nature, elders and God” (KINOTI 1992, 84). Kinoti maintains that “honesty, reliability, generosity, courage, temperance, humanity and justice, and social values that helped society to remain integrated, like peace, harmony, respect for authority, respect for and fear of supernatural realities” (KINOTI 1992, 80) are the features of communitarian societies. According to Gyekye these virtues apply as well: “kindness, compassion, sympathy, concern for others—in short, any action or behaviour that is conducive to the promotion of the welfare of others” (1998, 324). These are the features that culminate the African philosophy of *ubuntu*.

Johann Broodryk defines *ubuntu* as “a comprehensive, ancient worldview which pursues primary values of intense humaneness, caring, sharing and compassion, and associated values, ensuring a happy and quality community life in a family spirit or atmosphere” (BROODRYK 2004, 4).

Ubuntu here suggests a concept that represents the values embedded in what it means to be human. It echoes the worldview and the experiences of the African people, particularly those in the Sub-Saharan region. Mangena describes it as “the ethical benchmark of African societies” (2009, 17), suggesting that it is the deep-rooted standard value that is used to measure human social relationships within most Sub-Saharan African communities. Similarly, Mawere posits that: “Ubuntu is a multi-faceted philosophical system that involves logic, metaphysics, epistemology and ethics; it is a philosophy of life that is concerned with the reinforcement of unity, oneness and solidarity among the Bantu people” (MAWERE 2012, 3).

Argument for a Virtual Communitarianism

Since it does appear that digital or virtual communities are here to stay and perhaps the defining nature of what it means to be a community in the future, it is essential to find ways to make these communities as functional as possible. Virtual communities may eventually take over geophysical communities or become the foremost communities people identify with, even more than the communities where they are physically located. This does not mean virtual communities ought to lose all the features or quality of a physical community. Thus, in what follows in this final section, we make a case for a virtual community that integrates key attributes of African communitarianism.

This is important because, despite many years of change and the influence of globalization, the African communitarian ideology still espouses some essential ethico-cultural values that hold communities and societies together as a whole. As Mintzberg (2009) concisely points out, although there are some great values in individualism such as the promotion of leadership, incentives to work, and encouraging development, humans are essentially social beings who require a social system to function to bring about the greater good. For Mintzberg, this is what the word “community” ought to stand for; that social glue that binds us together for the greater good. Gyekye (1997) similarly points to the attainment of the common good, the good that is collective, shared, universal, and beneficial to all, as the African communitarian society’s key objective.

The implication here is that to attain an online community that is communitarian, there is the need to integrate values that rally people together towards the common or greater good of the community rather than going after individual pursuits and agendas. This is more accurate, especially in virtual communities, where one chooses to join a virtual group on their own and not by virtue of place of birth or settlement. Unlike geophysical communities where one can argue that they are members by birth or by location and not necessarily by choice, the same cannot be said of virtual communities whose

memberships are sometimes applied for and a set of conditions must be confirmed before membership is conferred. Thus, if one is a member of a virtual group, then that is by one's choice and by one's willingness to promote the interests of the community and embrace its values. As such, there are much more compelling reasons for members of virtual communities to seek and work towards the common or greater good of their communities than in a geophysical community.

Furthermore, the need for virtual communitarianism is underscored by what is recognizable as the online community's ills and evils. This is characterized by online bullying, hate speech, online stalking, identity thefts, and impersonation. It is our strong conviction that these African communitarian values and features, when judiciously incorporated in virtual communities' structures, would make virtual communities ethically robust and sustain their existence.

What then are these values from the traditional African communitarian attitude that need to be assimilated in these emerging digital communities to move them from a mere amalgamation of individuals on a digital platform to an actual virtual community qua community? To answer this, the paper takes a look at how African communitarianism defines or understands community, as expressed here below by Gyekye:

[Communitarianism] sees the community as a reality in itself—not as a mere association based on a contract of individuals whose interests and ends are contingently congruent, but as a group of persons linked by interpersonal bonds, which are not necessarily biological, who consider themselves primarily as members of a group and who share common goals, values, and interests. (1997, 41-42)

Interestingly, Gyekye, in the quote above, did not allude to the idea of a geographical location in his definition of a communitarian community. This makes his definition extendable to virtual communities, insofar as such a community, although aided by modern digital technology in this instance, can imbibe essential communitarian values and features. These features are explained again by Gyekye below:

The notion of shared life—shared purposes, interests, and understandings of the good—is crucial to an adequate conception of community. What distinguishes a community from a mere association of individuals is the sharing of an overall way of life. In the social context of the community, each member acknowledges the existence of common values, obligations, and understandings and feels a commitment to the community that is expressed through the desire and willingness to advance its interests. (1997, 42)

From the above, it is evident that the African communitarian conception of community is centred on shared interests and purpose. These are features that do not require a geophysical boundary to work. Indeed, as it has already been said, virtual communities are better placed to attain shared purpose and interests due to how information is readily accessible to their members and the voluntary membership feature of virtual communities. However, there is more; shared interests imply common values which impose some obligations and commitment on all members. For Gyekye, members of a communitarian society are required to demonstrate concern for each other's well-being, do their best to improve upon each other's well-being, pursue the common good, and overall, be involved in community life. Also, some sense of loyalty is highly desired from members to the community's cause or agenda.

The paper had in the previous section referred to some of the ethical values esteemed within the African communitarian outlook. These include, as Mawere (2012) correctly notes, unity, oneness and solidarity. These virtues are highly necessary to entrench the sense of community that African communitarian societies are well noted for. They are what ensures a high sense of belonging and uniformity of purpose. Solidarity breeds compassion and empathy, a feeling that makes one identify with the needs and sufferings of others and move them to act to alleviate the plight of others.

What do these mean for the virtual communitarianism we are proposing? The agenda to incorporate communitarian features and ethics, namely shared and sustained interests and purpose, obligation, commitment, solidarity, unity, and oneness into virtual communities will require much time to cultivate and mature. An online group can be formed in minutes but creating a virtual community fashioned around these essential African communitarianism values does not occur instantly. As virtual community members participate in the group's shared experiences, they begin to build trust that leads to codependency. Solidarity must be cultivated and motivated for the sustainability of the group. Members of a virtual communitarian society must not be concerned with their affairs and interests only. They must show commitment to group efforts and the needs of each other. It is important, especially for socially oriented virtual communities to do this because it is the show of solidarity that binds them in unity and oneness of purpose and sets them apart from a business or an intellectual virtual community, where relation does not go beyond business or academic matters.

We shall describe virtual communitarianism as an online community that integrates essential features of traditional African communitarianism in practice and outlook. Since communitarianism generally underscores the community's supremacy over the individual, a virtual communitarian theory also must stress group interest over that of the individual. That is what can sustain the continuous functioning of the virtual community. The shared

interest in the virtual community is solidified through solidarity and shared responsibilities. This means that members of a virtual community must contribute money or any form of resources if the group requires it, perhaps for a project that ensures to the group's benefit. This may be in the form of monthly or periodic contributions. Every member must step up for others when the group sees the need to do so, while selfish and greedy behaviours must be condemned and eschewed. Just as laziness and constant begging are abhorred in traditional communitarian societies, people who exhibit such behaviours must be exposed and admonished.

If a community will thrive, each member has to perform their part with respect to the whole organism efficiently. A strong community has well-connected, codependent members that share obligations for identifying and solving problems and improving its well-being (CLINICAL AND TRANSLATIONAL SCIENCE AWARDS CONSORTIUM 2011). Given all these, perhaps Mintzberg (2009) was spot-on in claiming that a vibrant [virtual] community is one where talented people are loyal to one another, and their collective work, where everyone feels that they are part of something extraordinary, and their passion and accomplishments make the community a magnet for talented people. Similarly, the theory of virtual communitarianism this paper is defending agrees with Mintzberg's position that the decisive indicator of whether a [virtual community] has attained a true sense of community is whether its members consider themselves as responsible citizens of the broader community.

Conclusion

The paper proposes a theory of virtual communitarianism, an online community that integrates essential features of African communitarianism in its orientation, outlook, practices, and ideals. We have expressed that some of the essential African communitarian values easily transferable unto existing and emerging virtual communities are solidarity, cooperation, and shared responsibilities. These values, we have argued, build trust, and foster a stronger sense of belonging among members of virtual communities. We have reasoned that it is essential for virtual communities to incorporate these virtues because membership here is not necessarily based on geophysical location, neither is interest sustained based on the regularity of members' physical contact. The multiplicity and diversity of the membership of virtual communities is profound. Thus, the inclusion of these communitarian virtues can bring members who often are far apart closer and help create a stronger community bond. The overarching goal of the paper's proposal is to ensure that the transition of geophysical communities into virtual communities does not happen without the integration of sound and positive African communitarian values.

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