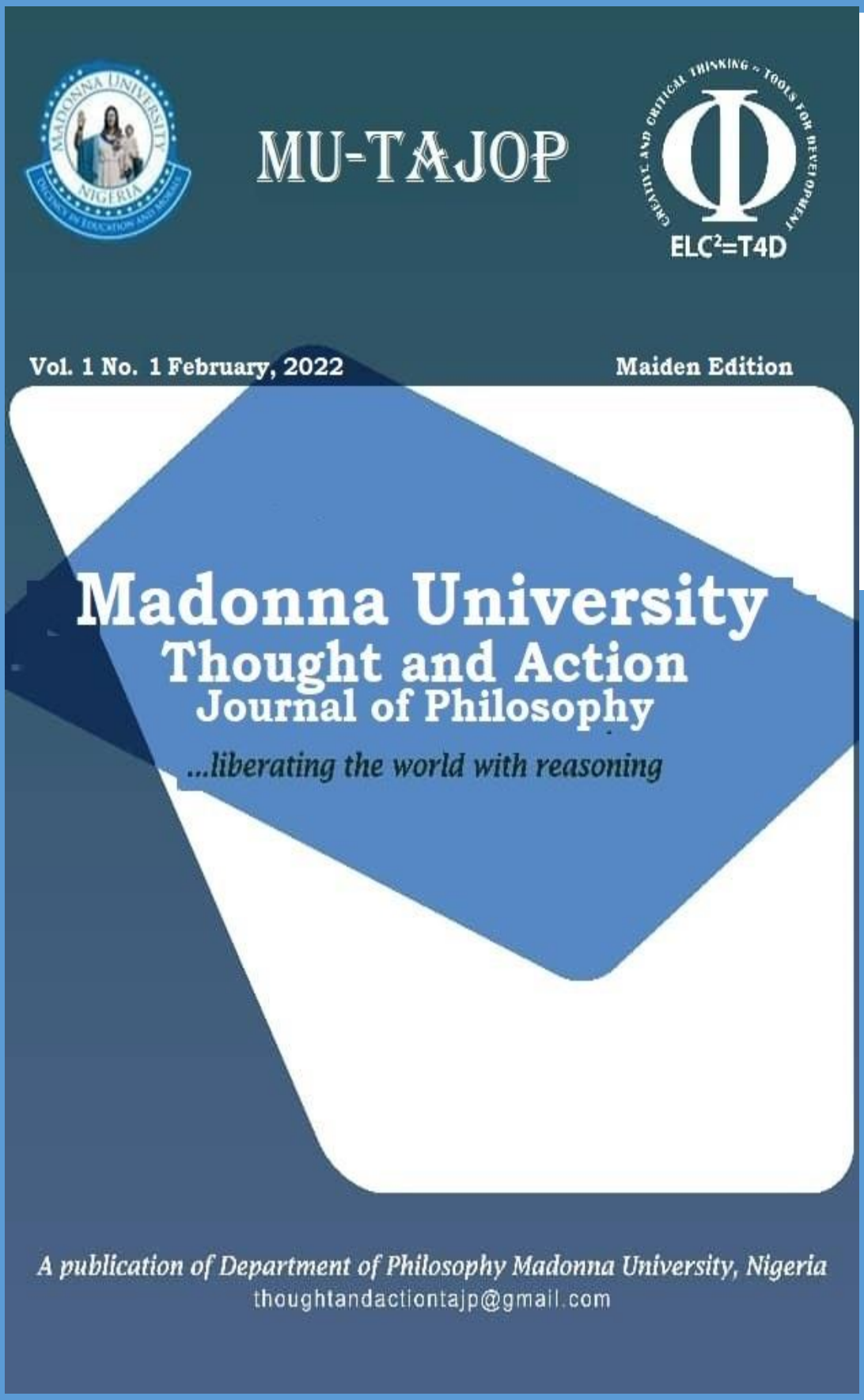

Interrogating the Concept of Personhood in African Thought: Beyond the Communitarian Debate

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Abstract:

Conceptualization of personhood by Menkiti's (1984) *Person and Community in African Traditional Thought*, Gyekye's (1992) *Akan Concept of a Person* and Mbiti's (1970) *African Religions and Philosophy* has shown that communal intimate belongingness is mostly limited to a micro community more than the totality of a larger African community. Within the context of this communal living, they have argued that, an individual owns no personality, and only becomes a person through social and ritual incorporation. For these scholars, personhood has been pictured as a state of life that is acquired "as one participates in communal life through the discharge of the various obligations defined by one's stations" (Menkiti, 1984 p.176). Personhood they say, is a quality acquired as one gets older. Hence, according to them age is the determinant factor. This paper argues that, this mode of thinking not only ignores the essentials of personhood, namely, self-determination and the rights of the individual but it also, exposes the overbearing mode of the community and scuttles the inherent freedom and primacy of the individual thought and his right to question communal ideas. The youth has a different point of view from that of an older individual, though both are defined by the quality of personhood. African wisdom literature upholds that life in its existential meaning is human fellowship and solidarity among individuals though, the rights of individual persons and freedom of self-expression within the communities are not in doubt. The paper argues the conclusion that, while communal *ethos* matures the individual in the community, such conclusion does not have ontological and epistemological precedence over individual persons. In his lone level, the individual experiences varying modes of competing epistemologies that activates his moral arsenals to evaluate, protest, distance and effect reform on some features of the community to ingratiate his widely varying needs and interests.

Key Words: Communitarianism, personhood, personal identity, ethical maturity, human well-being, African thought, African philosophy, African heritage, inter-cultural philosophy, African studies.

Introduction

Africa has bestowed to the world community a humanistic heritage, which the entire world order can only ignore to its peril. This unique heritage resource which defines human personality in

Africa is encased in proverbs, names, folklore, songs, etc. Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* introduces a representative quality of a detested personality in *Unoka* who frittered away his youth by playing his flute and enjoying the festive seasons of the village, Umoufia. He neither succeeded in life nor attained the status of an ancestor because he did not achieve personhood. Kwame Nkrumah's thoughts on *African Personality* (1969, 1970), Leopold Senghor's *Negritude* (1971), Julius Nyerere's *Ujamaa* (1971), and Kenneth Kaunda's *Humanism* (1966) are all fragments of references to the African notion of personhood. On the whole, personhood in African ontology conceptualises a human-centred philosophy of life which argues that the dialectics of social engineering is aimed ultimately at achieving true dignity and development of the human person. Kaunda, a philosopher and humanist lucidly captures this when he says, "the human being is above ideology and above institution... we must continuously refuse to tie the human being to anything... society is there because of the human being, and whatever we undertake to do, we have got to remember that it is the human being that is the centre of all human society". (Kaunda, 1979 p.103). Obviously, there are two strands of personhood in African philosophical mind; that which encapsulates communal conception (that is, that which conceives that where a crowd is, there also is the truth) and that which emphasizes the individual moral responsibility (that is, that which conceives that, wherever there is a crowd, there is untruth).

This paper examines these strands of personhood and interrogates the place of individual rights, capacities and abilities in evolving human personality. It is argued here that, personhood in African societies resonates human existence which combines the moral, spiritual, economic, and physical well-being of the individual. A deconstruction of the current debate on personhood in Africa reveals the ontological and epistemological consequences of assuming the primacy of the reality of the communal world over the reality of individual life.

A Conceptual Labyrinth of Personhood

Personhood is a concept that elicits plural meanings. Euro-Western scholars have argued that being an actual person in the first place is important and determining what or who a person is involves setting boundaries. In their reasoned articulation, Baldwin and Capstick, (2007) opines that, "where someone falls in relation to those boundaries will determine whether s/he is considered a person or a "non-person". For ethicists, this means possessing certain capacities. Some have argued otherwise that personhood equates with simply being a human being. For Africans, the idea of human fellow-feeling has been added as a definition of personhood while also highlighting the importance of the physical body as another quality of personal identity. African scholars like Menkiti, Wiredu, Gyekye and Molefe have argued in this direction that, to be a person in Africa, one needs not just to be born of human heritage, one needs also to have achieved certain socioethical standards in the community. They have adduced the thesis that, personhood is not biologically transmitted or inherited. It is by strength and efforts acquired by an individual as s/he matures in the society. On the strength of this proposition, Menkiti draws a distinction between being a human and being a person. Referencing Tempels, Menkiti on the one hand refers to man as '*muntumutupu* (a man of middling importance)' – and on the other hand, a 'person' '*muntumukulumpe* (a powerful man, a man with a great deal of force)'. (Menkiti, 1984 p.172). So, in African tradition, it is not enough for one to be merely a human being; more is required, s/he is supposed to become a person – we are supposed to achieve it. For Menkiti and his likes, the notion of a person or personhood includes the idea of excellence and 'plenitude of force at maturation' (Gyekye, 1984; Gyekye, 2011;Menkiti, 1984; Wiredu, 1992; Wiredu and Gyekye, 1992). This paper shall deconstruct these varied approaches to personhood in order to tease out an authentic view of African personhood.

The Inherent Theory of Personhood

The point of this theory is that, being a person carries with it a sacred and unique appeal to a right sense of reasoning. Understood as such, the human person is an individual of a rational nature. Personhood here transcends bodily quality and implies that a person has a kind of unique inner essence which may even be believed to continue beyond the physical human life. Personhood is thus defined beyond the material entity, that is, the belief in a kind of soul that exists intact underneath all the neurological losses of dementia, that is, a unique individual with supreme qualities which include self-transcendence (Post, 2006 p. 231; Nor, 2010 p. 41).

Capacity-Based Theory of Personhood

This theory posits that the ability to *think* and *reason* logically is a qualification for personhood. This point was grounded by Cooley according to whom the possession of rationality is key to human personality (Cooley, 2007 pp. 37-44). This point has been made clearer by Warren (1973) who defined six criteria for personhood, namely consciousness, reasoning, self-motivating activity, capacity to communicate, presence of self-concept and self-awareness. The understanding here is that self-knowledge is a crucial qualification for personhood. Rationality is thus availed here as a necessary precondition for personhood. What this means is that, the concept of personhood excludes those without capacity for integrated and goal-directed behavior. This concept of personhood is not only shifty it does not share the African temper of personhood. It sounds more reasonable to hold that; a person, without prejudice to any condition, is a combination of both spiritual and material elements created by the ultimate Being-God in his image and likeness.

Interpersonal Theory of Personhood

This theory reflects a relationship-based understanding of personhood and supposes that, personhood entails an authentic engagement of oneself with others in the community. (Kitwood, 1997 p. 8), informs us rightly here that, personhood refers to a social standing/status that is bestowed upon one human being; by others, in the context of social relationship. Thus, Personhood is here understood beyond age, social status, or even negative state of mental health.

The Body Theory of Personhood

This theory holds that, personhood is bestowed on a particular person whose human existence is linked to a physical body in a particular, familial, cultural and historical context. This materialist interpretation of the human person views the human person as a being that has concrete, solid and physical (substance) with ration-ality, consciousness and experience. This matches Heidegger's existential denomination of the human being (*dasein*), which literally means "being-there", exclusively used to refer to the being that we ourselves are. Personhood is thus understood here as a somatic being with the capacity of thought, reflection and communication. These two parts are not separate as in Descartes body/mind dualism but rather a unified form which experiences the-world and expresses itself in a bodily form.

Personhood in African Heritage

African wisdom literature argues out a philosophy of human well-being and fellow feeling. The Tiv of Nigerian expression, *uma ka orjime*, meaning, *life is community fellow-feeling* serves as a case in point here. Expressed as such, the oral corpus of African Philosophy presents a thought system that, African well-being is solidarity among individuals This thought system presents man as organically embodied in a series of associations and that, life, from birth to death has full value only in these close ties. Chinua Achebe is reported endorsed this when he says,

> A man who calls his kinsmen to a feast does not do so to save them from starving. They all have food in their homes. When we gather together in the moonlit village ground, it is not because of the moon. Every man can see it in his own compound. We come together because it is good for kinsmen to do so (Achebe, 1959p.55).

This idea of communal living prevalent in Africa has intrinsic value; it is a product of African humanism which is concerned with the preservation of life because life is his or her ultimate concern, and that life more meaningfully grows in solidarity with other members of the community. Menkiti's communal conception of personhood is most obviously situated here. He, like Gyekye (1984), Wiredu(1992), Mbiti (1980), Motsamai (2016) argued on the same score that, personhood is acquired as one participates in communal life through the discharge of the various moral obligations. This conceptual frame which has gained ground in African Philosophy shall be interrogated within the precinct of African oral traditions and customs.

African Names

Names in Africa teach, instruct, motivate and inspire personal identity. Names are warehouses of religious and philosophical truth that aid the development the individual person. They reveal our *being*, our thoughts and aspirations and express our relation with our maker. African names also represent our attempt to understand the universe and ourselves, our place in the universe and our attempt to achieve order in our human midst. One's name therefore constitutes who one is; the essence, without which one is a no person. To be known by a name is to be dependent, linked with the one who utters it, and to know all a (wo)man's names is to have a special claim upon him (Kaunda, 1979 p. 45). For example, the *Shona* name *purombomunhu*, (*even the poor are human beings*) is a classical expression of African principle of the sanctity of life. That; life is understood to originate from the divine Being, and that; life is not only a core condition of personhood, it defines the equality between human beings; rich or poor, with or without children. Names not only express the dignity of the human person, they in fact express life itself. *Uma* (soul), *Ishima* (heart/life) among the Tiv expresses a very comprehensive philosophical notion of human life which. on the one hand includes the world, the universe, creation, with all its grandeur, including the non-physical forces which constitute the cosmic reality. Thus, the Ebira sums up this philosophy of life as *Ozovehe* (*oza o vi eheni*) meaning the human person is life (Ehusani, 1991 p. 143). Ehusani (1991 p.143) argues further and pointedly that, Yoruba names like, *Omololu*.that is, children are supreme/children are lords, *Omolade*, that is, children are the crown of life, *Owootomo*, that is, Money is not as valuable as children etc, not only resonate with deep human fellow-feeling and or an indication of the supremacy of life, they indeed define personhood among these ethnic nationalities. Among the Igbo in particular, names like *Maduka*, that is, the human person is greatest; *Ndubuisi*, that is, Human life is first; *Ndubueze*, that is, Human life is King most prominently express life as an essential quality of personhood ordained by God. Similarly, the Etsako people have names like *Oyone* – the human person is greatest; *Oyarebu* – the human person is strength; *Omoyetse* – children are the essence of life. Clearly, life cannot be quantified or compared with material things, and so any material gain(s) of whatever quantity or quality is not, and cannot be a substitute for life.

African Proverbs

African proverbs serve as the store house and medium of African humanistic heritage. They express the people's observations and reflections in condensed form on human life, human relationships, human society and human destiny. They depict the attitudes and beliefs of Africans and their outlook to life. They are channels through which human communion and communication is made

possible, and hence proverbs are like horses for searching for truth, and meaning in existence. So, it is that human fellow-feeling in relationship is cherished above any quantity and quality of material acquisition.

In Egbira, Ehusani, (1991 p.156) chronicles such humanistic expressions in Proverbs thus; *Irehiondu o dahihuirehiavutani* (a house of fools is better than a house of lizard) *Oza o ma siozamoenyi re* (one does not use a human being to measure a river) *Eyi Ozasgoro-goro vi uhuo* (the very presence of a person is a knife/sword) These expressions have shown that, the individual person is the measure of all things and incomparable with material things. In this ontology, life is worthless and meaningless without other human beings. Personhood is thus measured above all that there is and the human person is believed to possess something that even the lion and the elephant do not have – the human person is a spiritual force, he has a divine spark in him. The Yoruba of Nigeria recognise this human worth by saying *Fifunniowo fun, ko to eniaiyi* (Money and material may shine and glitter, but they do not match human worth) and that, *Amorereni Olorun fi moawoneda* (It is good clay that God used in moulding human being). For the Igbo life consists in the mutual interdependence between natural and supernatural forces in which man must find a peaceful place if he is not to endanger his own existence. Using the symbolic breaking of the kola-nut which for the Igbo is life, man calls all beings and forces to communion by saying: "He who lives above, the giver of life, we thank you, *Ani* (the earth Goddess) come and eat kola-nut, *Amadioha* (God of thunder), come and eat kola-nut, may the river not dry up and may the fish not die; we shall live" (Momoh, 2000 p. 372).

This idea of life argues that any negative behaviour or action on the part of the individual can affect collective living, which will spell doom for the entire human race – there is no individual immortality as such because there is no isolated force. But there is the immortality of life force in which the individual life force participates in the advancement of the general wellbeing of all. The -understanding here is that, "life is real, more meaningful, when we interact very closely with other human beings. Such is perhaps the informing African philosophical dictum (Mbiti, 1970), "I am because we are, and since we are therefore I am". This most obviously explains why long life is seen as a blessing, and any threat to life is viewed as an aggression against the entire community that must be squarely tackled.

The treatment above affords us the philosophical basis for concluding that the foundations of African culture have established that *life* is foundational to personhood. The Tiv of Nigeria refers to this foundational element as *Uma (soul), also known as Okra by the Akan; a* constitutive element of the innermost self, the essence of the individual person, that is, the living soul; identical with life which equated as a divine spark of the Supreme Being. Gyekye (1987 p.85) informs us here that, "the presence of this divine essence in a human being may have been the basis of the Akan proverb, *All men are the children of God; no one is the child of the earth*". Thus, Personhood is *prior* to what an individual has acquired in life. Thus, the person is first of all an individual, unique, unrepeatable reality (Mondin, 2007 p. 247). An individual's being is defined by its intrinsic value more than what one has acquired in material possessions.

Personhood and Human Development

Breakthroughs in technological medicine, communication technology and agricultural technology in the twenty-first last century has brought about the most glamorous civilization and the best of times in the history of mankind though, the present age could also be described as the worst of times. The rate of deterioration in our ecological system and the ever-looming threat of nuclear holocaust through wars or accidental detonations and unethical activities of the scientific and

technological community proves this point that, the twenty-first century has seen the emergence of the machine, and the dehumanization of the human person. While Technology has eased man's drudgery and improved his quality of life, his physical and psychical capabilities are either under used or artificialized. The 21st Century has added to this the artificialization and dehumanization of humanity by inventing life taking and life sustaining devices. Above all, technological advancement in nuclear weapons threatens the continued existence of humanity and even the whole range of living things. The suggestion here is that while on the one hand technology has enhanced human existence, it has on the other hand degraded humanity and served as an agent of depersonalization.

African ontology teaches that, human life has its origin in God and that the essence of life remains with the Supreme Being. This means that, the *human person* transcends the merely physical and material world. Endowed with spirituality and more like the creator than other creatures, the human person maintains a mystical communion not only with the creator, but also with the elements of "the world in-between." This dual character and quality of the *human person* similarly demands a developmental attitude that rhymes with it, that is, the employment of the instrument of science with humility, compassion and non-violence. Kim (1999 p.43) stretches this point further thus:

> Since a *human person* is possessed of both mind and body, requiring both spiritual and material fulfilment, pursuit of wealth must be tempered by the cultivation of a mind. Outer satisfactions of material kind should be enhanced by the inner satisfaction of the mind and spirit, and vice versa.

This is what qualifies as human well-being, a definitive solution to the problems of development and environmental degradation that affect human personhood. In a way, this entails a "the progressive economic and social development of human society through maintaining the security of livelihood for all peoples and by enabling them to meet their present needs, together with a quality of life in accordance with their dignity and *well-being*" (Sands, 1993 p.102).

This is a clarion call not to lose the humanist essence of African culture but to promote and defend the value and concern for human wellbeing. This in itself calls for the true meaning and quality of personhood. The question of who decides the quality of life and whether the present resources match the world's population, and whether the lifestyles of people from different regions, are in accord with the integrity and the nature of creation are all issues of grave importance in understanding what human wellbeing is all about. This calls to mind the question of sustainable human development as a pathway to human wellbeing.

In Africa, the human being is at the apex of cosmogenesis in the hierarchy of *beings*. This means that, s/he bears in a translucent manner the principle responsible for the process of being. This is supported by an analysis of the concept of *Mmadu*in Igbo thought, and its equivalent *ozovehe* in Ebira and *Or-CheUma* in Tiv cultural philosophies respectively. Variously worded as *Mmadu*, *Ozovehe* and *Or-CheUma* **(**that is, the 'totality', 'beauty' and 'essential appreciation') indicates for the African that, "man is the "beauty of life"; the beauty of all that is, therefore the plenitude of cosmic life. In Africa and for Africans therefore, *life* is the defining criterion of *all that man is,* materially and spiritually. In addition to the criterion of life, personhood is laced with good deeds; being a rational, moral agent, (*or-dedo)*, that is, a good man who by this definition is "a man who is in a harmonious social relationship with the human *community*" and other created elements in the promotion of wellbeing of the whole person and good neighbourliness (Ihuah, 2002 p.138).

This concept of personhood has been well acknowledged by Wiredu and Gyekye (1992 p.107) when they say,

> More than this one is required to make concrete material contributions to the well-being of one's lineage, which is quite a sizeable group of people. A series of events in the lineage, such as marriage, births, illnesses and deaths, gives rise to urgent obligations. The individual who is able to meet these in a timely and adequate manner is the true person.

While arguing that this form of socialization advances human personality, it suffices to state that personhood in Africa requires the individual investment in the moral and material development of the human person. It requires first and foremost the individual will and his critical evaluation of the mores of a given community that are ethically guided to promote and protect life and the wellbeing of the individual person.

Personhood and Ethical Maturity: Beyond the Communitarians

The human person by its very nature is a metaphysical being. It goes beyond its immediate material limitations towards ideal self-realization and towards the immaterial existent. Thus, we are because there are things in existence. The idea here is that the search of the individual human being to identify him/herself in relation to the external realities is a search for his/her well-being. Robert Ulrich (2010 p.37) articulates the African mind when he says,

> For the person who thinks and relates himself to the other objects in the world: he extends as it were, his mental aerial outside himself into a universe which is not his own, though he is a part of it. Without this process of "going beyond oneself or self-transcendence" the individual will be mentally closed in his own shell.

Argued above, human well-being presupposes a life lived meaningfully through human fellow-feeling and solidarity among persons. Well-being involves social and leisure activities that leads to higher levels of well-being. For the African therefore, personhood exudes an ethic of existence that is organically embodied in a series of associations and activities that portrays life as fully valuable only in those close ties. Achebe (1959) recalls this intrinsic quality of African community living as a cord that grows solidarity for human flourishing. The Igbo and Tiv ethnic communities are examples in this regard. He reminiscences the thoughts of these communities thus, "We come together because it is good for kinsmen to do so" (Achebe, 1959p.55). Thus, the well-evolved life is engineered by intrinsic' goals such as personal growth or having rich social relationships more than the extrinsic goals such as acquiring wealth or social recognition. It is not just *to have more*, rather it must mean *to be more* here understood as human flourishing; achieving the totality of the human person.

However, we must now re-evaluate the bifurcation of personhood into the communally induced personality and the individual (moral responsibility) identity by African philosophers such as Menkiti, Gyekye and their likes. In their works, the individual appears more like an infinitesimal element whose wholeness can only be possible with the community mores. Such strong distinction undermines the conceptualization of human wholeness and wellness, as it promotes tension and disharmony in human societies which harm the individual as well as the common good. All forms

of tensions that occur and manifest between the "self" (the individual personality) and the "other" (other individual personalities) in our societies and the world today are traceable to such a strict and polarized ontology. Tiv Ontology *Ayatutu* philosophy comes handy as an example of a veritable alternative programme to neutralise this tension and engender a balanced human relationship among diverse cultures and individuals. This African ontology creditably fills that gap by delicately erasing the line between the varied individual personalities and infusing the idea of missing links and complementarity into our understanding, interpretation and practice of human relationships.

If we take the Tiv ontology as a more representative for African ideas of personality, and as a good understanding of being human, we can conclude that humanity is one so we all should see one another as serving a missing link of reality and not as fragments of existence. This will dismantle walls of ethnicity and curb the problems it breeds namely, hatred, division, ethnicity, violence and wars etc. Every individual person has a unique personality and exists for no other reason than to share their unique qualities with other members of the community.

In this view, the process of achieving personhood goes beyond mere socialization. It is a conscious effort by the human person to make himself who he/she is/going to be. Humanity must transcend its narrow definitions and beliefs of *self* and *other*, *ours* and t*heirs*, towards the hospitality of humanity and for the joy of being. Human beings are not only responsible for their existence and individuality, they are also responsible for each other as well as for all things for a genuine state of cohesion, mutual dependence and healthy human existence. This is a state of a morally well-evolved human being who by this estimation is in harmony with both his own species as with the rest of nature; one who is in a social relationship with others and who is promoting the common good. Thus, the conceptualization of personhood as a communal phenomenon that is acquired "as one participates in communal life through the discharge of the various obligations defined by one's stations" (Menkiti, 1984 p.176) is not wholly acceptable. Construing the community as always prior to the individual diminishes the individual's self-determination and tramples on his right The individual person encounters moral options and choices that it lone can make and that it can account for as an individual member of the community. The Tiv of Nigeria would say, *me yav gambe awam kwagh* (*think-over a matter to be rationally counselled to make/take an informed decision*). Thus, communal ethos has ontological and epistemological relevance in the socialization of man though, to rule out the reality of individual choice; rationality or logical reasoning ability, will or capacity to decide on critical matters that affect his destiny is to misappropriate the foundational (metaphysical) component of personhood. By making a choice, man "gives birth to himself", ceases to be merely a "child of nature" and becomes a conscious personality, that is to say, a spiritual being, a being that determines itself. Even though some African societies favour a notion of communal personhood, the idea of individual moral autonomy still remains a priority for many others. The Yoruba, *Bini* and *Tiv* ethnic groups of Nigeria are a case in point here. They allow room for self-determination (and thereby individual moral responsibility). The case in point here is the allegory of a person's choice of *Ori* (destiny) in Yoruba culture. *Gbadegesin* (2000 p.313) informs that, three unborn friends were warned by their friends to go directly to the house of *Ajala*, the place where they would choose/get their *Ori* (destiny). Thus,

> Two of the friends followed the advice of their friends, the third one decided to go see his *father* before choosing his *Ori*. The two who went directly to get their *Ori* received a bad destiny and the third, after having met some *divination priests* at his *father's* place, having

> followed their advice to perform sacrifices and after having overcome some obstacles, received a good *Ori*.

Similarly, the *Bini* of Nigeria hold the view that human personality is predetermined by the Supreme Deity, *Osanobuwa*. Babatunde (1989 p. 276) informs us rightly that,

> The *Bini* maintain that before existence on earth, the individual goes before *Osanobuwa*, the Supreme Deity, to make the main events of his life manifest. The *Ehi*, the spiritual component, is the active participant in this exercise of predestining the self. This individual-in- potency, in awe and reverence, tell *Osanobuwa*, the Creator, what kind of life he wishes to lead and what fortunes he wants to attend his efforts when he gets down to the world of the living, *agbon*
> .

The notion of communal personhood as encapsulated above not only accommodates self-determination (and thereby individual moral responsibility) over a notion of communal personhood in which individuals blindly follows communal norms, it is laced with the idea of destiny that is predetermined by metaphysical forces. Among the *Bini* for example, *Osanobuwa*, the Supreme Deity puts a seal on the chosen wishes of the individual that cannot be changed by communal norms. Here reflected, self-determination props up in pair with a mature and reflective way of dealing with communal norms and expectations. This is the proper reading of African notion of personhood which argues that, "individuals with communal personhood can re-evaluate and refine existing communal goals, values, and practices outside of the dominating communal norm by taking a critical look at their community's normative framework (Gyekye, 2011 p. 21).

In Africa, the individual and the community coalesce to grow a moral person that belongs to a category of reality encompassing beings of a certain type: rational, moral agents, using language, etc. Menkiti's thesis that "personhood is a quality acquired as one gets older" rests on an inaccurate analysis of the prevalent currents of thought in African traditional societies. Here, Menkiti, Gyekye, Wiredu, and to some extent Mbiti and others have not only exaggerated the normative notion of personhood above the metaphysical, they have sought to rest the ethnocentric inspired assumption that there is a way of thinking congenial to all African societies. It may not be out of place to vouch that, personhood in African conceptual scheme is beyond the normative thread of Menkiti and his co-intellectual travelers. An Afowa proverb that, "*A belief that the child does not know anything made the elders to lose a war*" comes handy to show that knowledge and wisdom have no barriers on account of age, and that the youths, like the elders are equal partners in growing the ethics of community. To argue as Menkiti (1984 p.72) does that "the older an individual becomes, the more of a person that individual becomes" not only belittles the African concept of personhood, it contrasts with his quoted Igbo proverb, "What an old man sees sitting down, a young man cannot see standing up." This proverb hints at differences of perspective between older and younger individuals though, it is far from making an implicit allusion that personhood is an acquired quality. As has been argued elsewhere, the youth may have a different point of view from that of an older individual though, both are persons by virtue of their humanity (Ihuah, 2010 p. 184)

Similarly, the Yoruba wove a proverb that, "A recognition that, the wisdom of the youth is as viable as an elder led to the founding of Ile-Ife in its present site" (Akinlade, 1984 p.40). The oral history espoused above signifies that, human reasoning is natural and therefore more fundamental than artificially constructed culture. The ability not only to judge right from wrong, but to make

the right choice requires evaluation of competing values by the individual. It requires rationality and an expression of the will of the individual in a community more than blind adherence to unaudited community mores. A process that grows the individual from the stage of an absence of moral obligation, into a widened maturity of ethical sense to conquer hour after hour *to earn a happy life* in the community is more a product of rationality than age and passivity. The *Tiv* of Nigeria are quick to point out here that, *wanye kaaer I bur yartiôr* (a young man advised that the Buffalo be butchered up-side-down) added to the wisdom of the community to learn the art of butchering the Lion. Here argued, it is a call for individuals to be rationally responsible for their own lives (being) instead of relying on communal mores. This is what defines humanity as moral-agents, namely, individual self-awareness which Gyekye (2011p.21) says is a precondition of moral reasoning. He says,

> The person's ability for autonomous reasoning allows her/him to assess multiple options, s/he can agree on the communal moral preferences, but s/he could also have chosen to disagree with the communal moral understanding. This means that, even if the person's moral preferences are equal to the communal ones, s/he is individually responsible for her/his actions.

Man is born a person by virtue of his/her possession of *Imago Dei* (the Divine Spark). What man achieves is rather a refined personality that clothes his *being* which does/should not make him/her a person above being human. To argue that "an individual who has no name will work toward personhood, and at the end of life, that individual loses personhood because he or she has departed for the next world" (Menkiti, 1984 p.176) is another error of judgement that has no locus in any traditional African society. All traditional African societies acknowledge life as the core index of personhood. The individual is (exist) before community. Thus personhood is a product of *being* than *becoming.* The *Ebira* of Central Nigeria sums up a philosophy of life, Ozovehe (oza o vi eheni) i.e. the human person is life (Ehusani, 1991 p.143). Yoruba names like, *Omololu*, that is, children are supreme, *Omolade* i.e. children are the crown of life and the Igbo names like *Ndubuisi*, that is, Human life is first; *Ndubueze*, that is, Human life is King most appropriately express life as fundamental and foundational to personhood as instituted by God. Even the dead (the living dead) are accorded the status of personhood because their transcendent status has made them members of the community. They still relate with, and partake in the activities of their community, they are ritually incorporated into the wider family of both the dead and the living (Mbiti, 1980 p.108).Fortes (1987 p. 257) has argued this much of the *Tallensi* when he says "No one can be certainly known to have been a full human person until he is shown, at the time of his death, to have been slain by his ancestors and therefore to deserve a proper funeral". Ehusani (1991 pp.188-189) succinctly confirms this point thus;

> Human life is the ultimate reality and meaning in creation, it is something sacred, something to be loved beyond everything else. The litmus test of all human behaviour and activity is: does it promote life or does it threaten life? ... and that human achievement is measured by how much life a person has given, promoted or protected. Such as the treatment meted to childless couples, the fear of, and lynching of witches and wizards etc, would generally find explanation within this preoccupation with human life.

Even though personhood requires an individual with rationality or logical reasoning ability, consciousness, self-awareness, ability to initiate action, moral agency and the ability to engage in moral judgments; requirement reserved for the living members of the society, in Africa, the dead (the living dead) are also accorded the status of personhood because their transcendent status has made them members of the community. To state explicitly states that a human being without this ethical maturation does not have personhood is best understood as a contradiction in terms in a manner of making a distinction between six and half a dozen.

This is the way of good character that aligns with the general social interest and collective wellbeing and common good of the society. *It is a rationally compelling state of life, a conscious and progressive effort at good character development – integrity, honesty, kindness, generosity, moral courage, and the likes. It is about rationally acting in such a way that the measure of one's actions becomes a universal rule.* The ancient Greeks calls it *arête (excellence of any kind)*- moral *virtue;* a trait or quality of life that is deemed morally good, that can direct a person's behaviour to achieve moral excellence and "human flourishing- a life worth living and dying for, the good life, and a state of well-being.

The concept of personhood in Africa thus reveals to us that, a human person is a very complex entity. At one and the same time, the human being is intellectual, rational, economic, political and religious spiritual, social, moral and much more. To treat the human person as if one is dealing only with a nonentity, however important this may be, without consciously adverting to other aspects of his/her being, is to do a grave injustice to him/her. We have argued further that, in Africa and for Africans, life is not only sacred, it is the supreme value that nourishes humanity.

Man is only man-in-community, meaning that personhood in Africa is understood in three senses; spiritual view of life, the sense of family, and the sense of community. We have interrogated the communal concept personhood which states that, "it is the community which defines the person as a person (Menkiti, 1984 p.176) and argued on the contrary that, this communal characterization of an African moral thought obliterates not only human rationality and will, it tramples on the rights of the individual which belongs to him as a person in the community. Community only makes the individual a corporate or social being, it does not assign *being*/personhood to him. The individual *person qua person* is created in the image of God as a human being with good character as attested to by the *Akan* moral maxim; *Onyame boo obiarayie* (God created every human being to be good). The Hausa of Northern Nigeria have a similar maxim "character is a line drawn on the rock, nobody can erase it" (Kirk-Greene, 2000 p. 246). The truth value of this expression is reflected in the Yoruba concept of *Ori*, that is, the inner head (Hallen, 2000 p. 295) which suggests that, man and his character are mere puppets in the hand of fate or supernatural forces. Similar allusions in *Tiv* culture exemplify the metaphysical essence of the individual which goes to show that, personhood is a state of *being human.*This explains why *Or-Che Uma*, the Tiv concept of personhood is assigned to both the old, the young and thee unborn. This is an argument to the effect that, communal ethics counters the individual person from expressing something that is deeply essential to that person being who s/he is thus compromising human integrity.

Thus, the argued conclusion of Menkiti that a crucial distinction exists between the African view of man and the view of man found in Western thought does not sound convincing. At best, the African view that it is "the community which defines the person as person, not some isolated static quality of rationality, will, or memory" (Menkiti, 1984 p.171) has not led to any distinctive African concept of a person but an example of African rules and modes of socializing individuals.

Social interaction and cultivation of relationship, love and justice achieve personal identity and nothing more. That which a person acquires in society/community thus achieving ethical maturity are mere accidents that add to man's being. Being human/human personality or personhood is the essence of man. One is a person because of what he is by birth imbued with life, not because of what he acquires in community. Man's advance from the less human conditions of diseases, hatred, crime, war, tribalism, poverty, oppression, injustice, corruption, faithlessness, hopelessness, etc., to the more human conditions of health, of love, peaceful coexistence, equity, justice, community fellow-feeling, faith and hope matures him to impact his community positively though, it does not in any way make him/her more a person than others. The communitarian perspective of personhood by Wirendu and his cohort (Wiredu & Gyekye, 1992 p.111 note 20) not only exaggerates the role of the community, it fails to recognize the primary role of rights as a good belonging to an individual *qua* individual.The ambitions or goals of an individual person do not add or subtract from that individual's status as a person. In his words,

> The individual may fail in his strivings and, in the Akan community, for example, may consequently be judged as a "useless person" (*onipahun*), an opprobrium term. But it must be noted that what the individual would be striving for in all these exertions is some social status not personhood. The strivings are in fact part of the individual's self-expression, an exercise of a capacity he has as a*person*. Even if at the end of the day he failed to attain the expected status, his personhood would not for that reason diminish, even though he may lose social respect in the eyes of the community. So that it is social status not personhood at which individuals could fail.

An individual is autonomous in his own right so he alone can determine at least some of his own projects and pursue them (Gyekye 1992: 112). What this means is that, "individuals can evaluate, protest, distance and affect reform on some features of the community" (Motsamai 2016:51). In reality therefore, persons are subject to change and can therefore sometimes experience themselves in varying modes of competing epistemologies characteristic of the varying human experiences that are defined by their widely varying needs and interests. This is to say that personhood is more of a self-creating project than a community-created project. It is living a life of integrity by which the individual expresses his individuality. It is creating oneself in richer and more sophisticated ways, seeking to understand life on your own terms and not having your views dictated to you an authority or community.

Conclusion

This essay has interrogated the communitarian concept of personhood in relation to individual moral responsibility, I have questioned in particular the "radical and moderate" theses of Menkiti, Gyekye, Mbiti and their likes in contrast to the right of the individual in the community. I have acknowledged the role of the community in shaping the moral compass of individual members of a given community though, I opine that such conceptualization should not in any way diminish the idea of individual moral responsibility. Communal notions of right and wrong, good and evil should not overtake personal judgments when it comes to deciding what one ought to do or not to do. The argued conclusion here is that, individuals in a given community may mature through communal mores and acquire a personality (personhood) though, they can, as rational beings, reevaluate and refine existing communal goals, values, and practices, (Gyekye, 2011 p. 21). What this means is that communal persons have not only the ability to come up with their individual moral preferences that

differ from the dominating communal norm, they can also take a critical look at the normative framework of their community and alter it for their personal good or the greater good and development of their community. This is because individual reasoning is natural and therefore more fundamental than artificially constructed (community) norms.

A conclusion is thus argued that, any process that centralizes the community over and above the individual freedom and self-expression seeks excessive human dominion and in the process exposes the overbearing mode of the community on the individual. Humanity must go beyond the communitarian concept of personhood that endangers the individual, to the acknowledgement of the primacy of individual choices; the reality of the individual histories over and above his communal world consciously, to avoid personal pain, not to act in ways that contradict one's moral preferences, self-creation and integrity. By nature, the inner strength and power of the individual dictates that he must first seek to understand life on his own terms instead of allowing himself to be dictated by others; the community.

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