

THE CONCEPTION OF PERSONHOOD AND COMMUNITY IN AFRICA

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Abstract

It is not the case that 'personhood' and community could always be used or expressed in the same context as dual aspects of existence acting in one entity. In African philosophy, those concepts are deemed as ideas that are related but considerably different in some aspects. While the concept of personhood in Africa is discussed from a broad range, the idea of community is only sometimes discussed in connection with the notion settlement. This is because the conception of personhood in Africa is always attached to existence. Evidence of this is found in the life, living and society of the African communal setting. However, the relationships between these concepts are quite complex. This article does not discuss the usual subject of the clash of rights between the individual and the community. However, it offers to show the conceptual relationship that exists between personhood and community in Africa. An analytic method will be applied to this work in order to help create a wide range analysis of the relationship that thus exist between personhood and community in African worldview, which will also take an over view of some aspects of the arguments for communitarianism and socialism that have over clouded the trend's in an African worldview.

Keywords: personhood, community, communitarianism, socialism and communal setting.

Introduction

Personhood has been one of the most interesting topics in Africa philosophy today; this is because there are various conceptions of personhood in Africa. But for the sake

of this study, after a deep review of this idea, it is only the ontology and the normative notion of personhood that will be key in our focuses of the subject matter. The ontological sense of a personhood here relates to the essential make-up of the human person, as in essence or the *quidity* the original stuffs that constitute a human person. Just like the case of the Igala people, in their adage that says; *Ibe Chone*. A person is only qualified to attain personhood only by reasons. This is because man can only attain the faith of personhood by consciousness and free-will. Thus, from the ontological point of view, there is also a sense in which a person is understood in terms of his/her own moral or normative being-ness which is linked to the community where the person springs from. These two are roughly what personhood and the community where he is said to come from or what it stand for, respectively, in this research, man by his nature is always at the search for knowing.

Thus, for the purpose of clarity of meaning, this broad conception needs to be pointed out that it is on the basis of how one is deemed to demeanor oneself in the community that one's personhood status is assessed and mentioned. But the question here is that, how else are these concepts, personhood and community connected, or becomes our point of departure, and how clearly does Africans interpret the place of these concepts? Could the difficulties in relating those terms be resolved in Africans? This paper will begin with the discussion of the concept of personhood, and then community. But it should be noted that a discussion of the notion of community in a philosophical sense is often tied to the concept of communitarianism and the advent of socialism in African. Then we shall be considering the relationship that exists between the ontological conception personhood and the community where he is said to have originated from.

Africa and the Concept of a Personhood

Personhood as a concept as understood in Africa is marked by the various phenomena that impact the individual as an existing entity. The idea of a person in Africa also implies a procesural dimension; this is because in Africa, a person is not born with personhood, but grows into a personhood at an adult age. There are certain processes that must be followed in the quest to be qualified into personhood. This was the reason Menkiti argued that:

African emphasize the rituals of incorporation and the overarching necessity of learning the social rules by which the community lives, so that what was initially biologically given can come to attain social self-hood, i.e., become a person with the inbuilt excellences implied in the term of spirituality and self consciousness (173).

Thus, personhood as an integral part of existence in African is understood to be the rites of passage that each individual, or in some cases groups, must go through during their circle of life. These rites of passage are another example of the dynamic nature of African living; Africans by nature are constantly developing and growing through the rites that are performed.

Much similar to what Gyekye overview when he classified a person into categories, for him the entity that makes up personhood is not more than five categories. But for the case of this studies, we shall be taking into study three major distinct entities which over clouds the rest of those categories which are as followed: the *okra* (the soul), *sunsum* (spirit) and the *nipadua* (body) just as conceived by Egbunu when he categories the human person among the Igala people to be made up of four categories, which are: *Ebiye* (Blood) *Ojiji* (shadow) *Okaye* (Destiny) *Angwola* (Body) as the foundation that makes up the human person (9). Thus, in arguing from the perception of Gyekye, the *okra* the soul is believed to be given to a person by the Supreme Being and also bears the destiny of the human being. Gyekye also argued that “Since the Supreme Being here in Africa is conceived of as the all good in its self, human destiny which comes from the Supreme Being is also conceived good as well, as well as the It is the bearer of life” (85).

Thus, so Gyekye and Kwasi Wiredu both assert that the presence of the soul in a person guarantees life and its absence in the human being leads to death (Gyekye 86 and Wiredu 120). The soul here is believed to be eternal but is capable of reincarnating other beings of its kind into being (Gyekye 98). The spirit is said to be the basis of individual personality and, like the soul is believed to come from the Supreme Being who is all good by its nature. The body is the material component of personhood which is perishable after death. In contrast to the multilingual nature of the African society, the above interpretation of the three components of personhood has not been totally accepted especially by the Igala and Akan philosophers. Prominent among these objectors are Wiredu and Kwame and Egbunu. In rejecting Gyekye's position, they hold that both the soul and body are physical.

According to the position of (Wiredu 120 & Kwame 345-346), they even went deeper to channel the human person into just two. And those two entities are rather quasiphysical, thus making it more different from Egbunu's position. By this, they mean that the entities that made up a human the person have near physical properties which cannot, therefore, be purely spiritual as claimed by Gyekye. Yet, Gyekye's position is affirmed by (Ajei 191-192, 200) and (Majeed 25-28). So far as the concept of personhood as discussed in this paper is concerned with what it means for one to be a human person or what it takes for one to be qualified into personhood, or that particular essence which is possessed by all human beings. So far as one is naturally

'born of a human seed' Menkiti argued that “one is expected to possess each and every of these categories in order to be described as a human person in every sense, therefore, it is not just adequate to be a human being without undertaking the full scale of personhood (172).

The Relationship between 'Society' and 'Community' in African Worldview

A close link exists between the concept of society and community in Africa. It is not uncommon, therefore, to find scholars employing the concepts 'society' and 'community' interchangeably or as synonyms. The concept of society in general is the totality of persons that have existed in line of history. A particular society on the other hand, is a given population living in a certain region whose members have lived together over a long period of time for the accomplishment of specific goals or ends. It is from the sense above that one can talk of 'the human society as a whole. In the second sense, we can now categorize the society as they are, examples the African society, the Arabian society, the Igala society, or Fulani society, etc. Kneller thus, argued that;

By community, one usually has in mind a sub-society whose members: Are in personal contact, Are concerned for one another's welfare *socialism*, and are committed to common purposes and procedures, share responsibility for joint actions and value membership in the community as an end worth pursuing (49).

Because of the impenetrability with arriving at a clear cut division between the concepts of society and community, researchers have come to see both terms as signifying the same notion.

When one is set to make a contrast between culture and society, he might say that a culture is the way of life of a people, whereas a society on the other hand is a person with an organized way of life. Thus, Eze following this same point of the view maintained that “Aristotle in his *Politics*, argued among other things that the ideal society is that which affords its citizens the opportunity for attaining happiness or what he described as the good life” (11). The concept of *good life*, in this context is described as the 'complete and active realization of all man's capabilities of activities', that is, those activities which contribute to man's self-fulfillment. But Aristotle also held that proper education, both physical and moral, is needed to complete this realization and thereby the achievement of the life of wellbeing. Put differently in the African content, Eneh and Okolo argue that “we may following Aristotle, describe an ideal political society or state as a consciously devised association of individuals for the achievement of deliberately defined aims” (49). In Africa, the major reason for the existence of any society or community is the procurement of the good life for its members. In other words, part of the reason why

society exists is for the provision of human social goods of the people who make up the human community. Following this line of reasoning, the State, it is argued, is nothing but a mere natural extension of the family or community. In the words of Jacques Maritain:

A concretely and wholly human reality is tending to a concretely and wholly human good, the common good. It is a work of reason, born out of the obscure efforts of reason disengaged from instinct, and implying essentially a rational order but is no more pure Reason than man himself (10).

Personhood (the Individual) and Community in Africa

The Cynics of the West have not been alone in rejecting or jettisoning the ideal of the community. In Western thought in general, there have been a number of movements or natives who have also come to see society as a clog, a bung-up, or an impediment to human joy and happiness. The anarchists or the social deviants of contemporary Western society; the Hippies and the Skinheads, all maintain a lifestyle of rebellion against society and its values. Similarly, a number of intellectual movements have arisen in the West that have depicted not just society itself but also human existence as a useless drudge. However, it is not unlikely that this anti-establishment behaviour and loss of faith in community may be due to the overt-individualism that characterizes much of Western life which differs from the African communalist nature where the other affirms the existence of one. In a social environment where the individual sees himself as supreme, autonomous and self-governing, any slight dislocation in the social equilibrium is bound to lead to this loss of faith in community life. In like manner, according to Ameh;

At first such society cannot exist in Africa. In such an environment, when the individual is faced with problems of life that he cannot tackle alone, he becomes distraught; feeling existentially alone in the world, the individual becomes cranky and comes to conclude that community is a clog, obstructive and encumbering (21).

In contradistinction to the type of attitude mentioned above, Africans are unlikely to concede to the individual absolutism, and that stands him head to head with the community which is a makeup of his identity, just as argued in Nyerere *Ujaama's* philosophy.

On the divergent, it is strongly believed that in Africa, it is in the community where a person comes from, that the life of the individual acquires a true meaning to its existence. In other words, it is not the self-isolated life that matters in Africa but the living in mutually interacting with other members of community, which the individual can ever hope to realize his or her social aspirations in life. Among the Igbo people of Nigeria, as among other African persons generally, the obvious curtailment of a person's power to do as he wills is provided by the potent force of

what is known as 'the will of the community'. As T. U. Nwala argues "in Africa, the being of the community is larger than, and prior to, that of any of its individual members since the being of the community as a whole is identical with the being of the total personality of the ancestors" (46). Emphasizing this idea of the social nature of existence in Africa, Opoku argues that "the saying is a common one in Africa which holds that a man is a man because of others, and life is when you are together, alone you are an animal" (92).

The points made above with a particular reference to the value of corporate living among Africans find support in Rousseau's notion of the *General Will*, where it is argued that "the individual can only find meaning in life by submitting himself to the common will of the community and, in such a corporate capacity, becomes an invisible part of what is called the *State*" (112). Hegel, appropriating much of Rousseau's theory, submerges individual liberty and freedom in the collective will of the State. However, Hegel's theory fails in that it denies individual freedom and makes people mere appendages to this mystic or abstract notion called the State. But I make bold to say, however, that the African notion of community is more germane than that of Rousseau or Hegel in that while emphasizing the corporate nature of human existence, it does not by that token deny individual liberty or the idea of every human being as both unique and important. On this note it is agreed that some African writers often exaggerate when they stress the idea of social cohesion in the traditional African society, the truth remains, however, that in all human societies, the world over, the closer bonds of human interdependence help in the creation and preservation of social security among human individuals who live together in the community.

As been shown above, community life in Africa helps to create a sense of amity and security among the members of society. It also helps in fostering respect for each member of the society as well. And if W. E. Abraham's opinion is anything to go by, in Africa, community life is usually conceived as having "a sacral unity, which comprises its living members, its dead who survive in less substantial form and its as yet unborn children" (25). In the same way, the central idea of community in Africa to a very large extent forms the bulwark of the collective interest of its citizens. Abraham's opinion finds support in J. S. Mbiti's statement which holds that in Africa, "the individual does not and cannot exist alone except corporately" (108). But to say that the individual cannot exist outside of the community setting is not to imply, as Hegel did, that the individual is a passive plaything or a mere appendage in what is abstractly called the State. Long ago, Robert Filmer had argued, in a manner similar to Hegel's that "kings ought to be obeyed in everything because they are the 'fathers' of their people, possessing an unlimited power said to have been inherited from Adam" (13). Repudiating this type of claim, John Locke reasserted the teaching common to the medieval theorists, which is that, "power in society is held and

exercised legitimately only in furtherance of community interests and must be subject to moral restraints” (24). What the interpretation of Locke's statement shows is that it is a moral responsibility on the part of a person to promote the interests of those who make up the society. In Africa, an individual who fails to do this would have failed in its duty or moral responsibility.

African Conception of Personhood in Connection to Spirits

The African view of reality may be leaning more towards Plato's Theory of Forms where Plato alludes to a world of ideas. In this light, Africans also believe in the world of the non-physical, however unlike Plato, Africans believed that the spiritual world really exists. The study of African Metaphysics largely focuses on the study of the Supreme Being and the other vital forces that made up the cosmos and the universe. While the study of contemporary Metaphysics in the West, has to do with the study of concrete particulars which can be perceived with the senses.

Again the spiritual nature of the universe in Africa when brought into the discourse of the mind-body problem will show that the African will lean more towards dualism than physicalism. Although African philosophers like Kwasi Wiredu and Saffro Kwame have argued for a quasi-physical African world. This is because in Africa there is a belief in the existence of a soul which is non-physical and a body which is physical. This is what Chukwudum B. Okolo argued that African Metaphysics is “The human being, in African universe, is viewed as interacting with lower beings or forces as well, inanimate things such as lightening, thunder, etc. These forces at times act as agents of the unseen spirits to punish evil doers. Consequently such forces are also revered and worshipped. Even charms, amulets, witchcraft, etc., become serviceable to Africans as definite ways of self-preservation, from the evil eye, for example, of guaranteeing success in his/her life's endeavor, or of inflicting evil on the enemy. According to Dewey, “the world of the spirits, human beings, and other lower organic and inorganic substances form the same totality of existing, interacting beings or reality” (250) “African metaphysics differs greatly from the naturalistic metaphysics of Dewey, Hook, Randall, Jr., and others, admit only one kind of reality in nature, namely the seen, the tangible and the verifiable. Nature, for these naturalists, is strictly monistic, without any bifurcation or radical splits. Consequently there is nothing like God, spirit, or soul in their universe, if these words are taken to mean different kinds of beings from the material and the tangible. Nature, for naturalists, is an all-inclusive category. Nothing exists outside nature. Dewey argues on this ground that:

It is clear that this naturalistic view of things is poles apart from that of the African who strictly maintains the existence of both the spirit world and the material, physical universe, each distinct from but interacting with the other. The physical, material universe is real for the African, not just an epiphenomenon or shadow of the real, as Plato maintained in some of his dialogues. (251)

On characterizing African metaphysics, we mention briefly that unlike the existentialists, particularly the radical types, the African does not regard the fact that the universe is merely 'thrown' into being. In Africa, the universe has a cause, and the cause is attributed to the activities of each 'vital force' responsible to harmonizing nature. These activities of the vital force in creational story are what Salisu A.A calls "being (ens Supremum, or highest Being) which he refers as the Creator and governs the universe with his laws through the activity of the spirits, the ancestors, the human person and finally the laws of the land (community)" (15).

Personhood as Reasons for Justice in African Community

First, by the virtue of justice, every human no matter his/her personal status should be given his/her moral obligations as a human first. This moral obligation can only be given to man because he possesses the foundational quiddity of justice, which is *free-will and rationality*. This is the foundational essence that distinguishes the human being from other beings. For the position of justice in Africa, it is understood that, justice is a necessary condition for peaceful co-existence in any community. This idea of justice as expressed, is written everywhere in Africa, it is expressed in expression of empathy, fear, joy and even in their sub consciousness. For instance, among the Igala society, the expressions justice as *Ofor kpai Ule*, justice and right judgment is foundational to their coexistence as a people. In a typical African community setting, Justice is a social virtue and a person is not just only by what he does but is expected to be just by what he is. This becomes the major reason why nothing can separate an African person from the hunger for Justice and the desire to use justice to pervade and direct the lives of the other.

From the position of Justice as a fundamental ethical concept in Africa today, justice in Africa is not just treated as an idea in Africa just as it is treated in the western word, it is understood more as that which defends the right of the innocent, poor and venerable. The importance of justice and personhood in an African community setting is so essential that Africans rely so much on justice as the bedrock of cohabitation and mutual coexistence in the shared space of the community. On this ground, Egbunu argues that:

An average African man understands what justice is, he enunciates daily the principle of justice: in Igala *Jewe kene kibejo* "let a person's own satisfy him". *Fukpe okwujo* "divide it equally" *Akpane omwu ane akpa* "let he who kills, dies with his victims". *Ene du ki yenz' omz' one akpunan enwu onugo akpunan* "whoever says another should not prosper will also not prosper" (23).

Considering the above argument, one can see that Africans' reasons for justice entail equal distribution of individual rights with respect to the differences relevant to law. Hence, an African adage which says; (live and let live) points to a kind of justice that accommodates both the rich and the poor, the young and the old, the strong and the

weak and so on in the same community. Our point here is that, in Africa there are no middle lines existing between personhood and the makeup of the community.

Community as Personal Identity in Africa

In term of identification, it is argued that Africans articulate a position that “the community where an individual is born to” is an authentic way or of ritual expression of a person's identity. And in Africa, without this community attachment to a person, he or she remains an outcast and a nonentity because of the fact that the community name defines and qualifies the person into personhood which gives rise to his or her personality in a social setting (Ekwunife 37). The implication of this position according to Obi is that:

In Africa, the individual acquires his personhood and obtained a personal identity or character through his community. Just like the ritual of naming within which the same obtains a name that defines him due to Africans attachment to their land (149).

The consequence is that the child appears determined as it may not have a chance to be otherwise. Thus, Umorem also argues that “the dynamic nature of the human person becomes compromised. But if a community is considered as a part and parcel of those elements of African culture that makes up personhood in an African unique” (15), then the community's name and influence can distinguish an individual from another through uniqueness of character and classification. On this starting point, one could argue that community in Africa is interpreted as equivalent to personhood and identity. But various interpretations of an individual's place of birth or the community where the individual is said to have originated from is “moulding” and “cutting” the person with a special individual or “separate identity”. The problem with this position is that in Africa it is the community that makes up the human person.

Community and the Future of Humankind

From the historical point of view, the first meaning of humanity describes a particular kind of animal that biologists encouragingly call *homo sapiens* or “wise humans” and which seems distinct from all other animals because of its powers of language, reasoning, imagination and technology. This biological and evolutionary use of the term has the same meaning as “humankind” and marks us out as a particular life form that is different to other kinds of animal and vegetative life that share the planet Earth with man.

Thus, the power of the personhood species is considerable over the non-human world. This is mainly because, our intelligence has consistently invented and deployed natural tools and technology which are all gotten from our community, which means by the nature of man, he is made to dominate the earth, and which his imagination has shaped religious and political meanings around which he thus, forms competing interests and social movements. Our tools mean we are not a simple

species but always function as a hybrid species part human and part machine in a constantly changing mix of human and non-human components. This hybrid of personhood as an existing entity must infuriate non-human life like animals, plants and microbes who could easily “take the humankind down” in a fair fight of simple life forms, but who have consistently encountered the human person in hybrid forms in which he merges our humanity with nature at his defense. Thus, man operates routinely in these human-machine interactions of various kinds.

Thus, the place of humanity in Africa is at a critical stage in the transition to a more sustainable planet and community due to man's activities and interaction among their selves. Our actions in the next decade will determine our collective path on the survival of humankind and the universe. Thus, it is strongly believed in Africa that our future as a people on earth at the moment aims to tell the story of where we are on our collective journey of humankind by connecting the dots that exist between what humanity is currently experiencing from fires to food shortages to a rise in populism with recent developments in the human community. That is why Andréa Ventimiglia is of the view that:

Each human person in their substance/essence is an individual existing independently in itself which is categorized in three stages, past, present and future. But, the meaning of humankind as a substance here is used to qualify the nature of man (24).

That is, humankind here refers to the individual distinctiveness among human persons. Each individual human person is directed with distinctive characteristics and is engaged in unique acts of existence; each is recognized as an individually unique human person.

Community as the foundation or bodies of people, animals, plants, vegetations and forestry plays a significant role in the socio-economic development of the human person, providing food and medications to millions of people. Thus, the west African-coast pacific countries lead the world in forest plantation development. Many African nations rely on efficient communities and their natural technologies for sustainable development of humankind. However, deforestation, degradation, wasteful use and sharp inequalities in the distribution of community benefits, remain serious problems that require novel solutions and joint action by Africans in their numbers.

Conclusion

Arising from our discourse in our study is the understanding that personhood and community is an ontological concept, understood and marked in Africa by various phenomena. These phenomena as we have seen in their ways of impacting man as an

ontological individual and as a member of a normative community placed personhood at the central of existence. The view of personhood and community in African philosophy is essentially foundational. The prototype of Africa where personhood and community falls under is not just seen as a being but a confirmation of being-with-others. Self, us or 'I' as we have seen above are defined in Africa in terms of 'we-existence', just as much as 'we' in 'I-existence', through social interactions that thus, exists between Africans: 'I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am.' Such a philosophy of self is bound to generate all sorts of problems with regard to the status of personhood (self as an individual), as an independent subject. Even though an individual person belongs to a class, yet experiences show that they cling to their own individualities as marks of **distincting** themselves with their community, which they cannot part with nor allow to be merged with others. To ignore this aspect of the community as a source of identity or to treat it inadequately would certainly constitute a detachment t their personhood.

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