# THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

## The Concept of Person in African Society and Its Implication on Human Thinking

**Mutisya Titus Mwau**
Student, Department of Philosophy, Catholic University of Eastern Africa

*Abstract:*
*This article unveils African concept of person and its implication on human thinking. It expounds the two schools of thought on the concept of person found in the continent: Communitarian, and Ontological school. The former holds that personhood is community given and thus it can only be ascribed to the one who live and acts according to the norms prescribed by the society. The latter describes the notion of personhood from innate perspective. It eschews all communal attributes in the description of the idea of personhood. The article endorse communitarian school of thought as it affirms that African person is a communitarian being. On the other side, it refutes ontological school of thought by asserting that ontological concept of personhood is Western notion which has been Africanized and presented in local languages. The article claims that African communitarian nature has always eradicated heterogeneous thinking and exalted homogeneous mentality in the continent.*

*Keywords: Person, African-society, human-thinking*

## 1. Introduction

In the philosophical anthropology, right from Ancient Greece, philosophy has always been in the front line in the attempt to study the notion of personhood. The Greek philosopher Protagoras defines man as the measure of all things; *homo mensura*. This assertion is less individualistic and more African sociologic. Protagoras uses the term man, not in singular meaning but in general idea that man is always connected with the other (Oded, 1999). This is purely African concept of person. Man in African society, does not exist alone, rather he is always dependent on other to complete his being. However, the continent celebrates two schools of thought on the concept of person; Communitarian and Ontological. In order to understand African concept of person and its implication on human thinking, the article attempts to intensively study these two schools of thought.

## 2. Communitarian School of Thought

In the Western concept of person, one is born a person and thus the moral conduct does not affect his personhood in any way. This is not the case in African society. According communitarian school of thought, personhood is community given. It is ascribed to the one who abides by community moral standard. The individual has to be loyal to the community and place communal needs first. This implies that individual of immoral acts, is either a less person or non-person according to the weight of his act (Munamato, 2018). This school is divided into two; Radical communalism and Moderated Communalism.

### 2.1. Radical Communalism

Radical communalism argues that community values take precedence over individual values. This implies that the well-being of the individual must be seen from the perspective of the well-being of the community (Obioha, 2014). This school of thought is driven by the rationale that the individual is a social being and he can only progress in the community. It claims that the individual depends on the community for personhood, definition, and dignity. This means that personhood is given and determined by the community. Accordingly, this claim is made because it is only within this framework that the common good of the community can be achieved (ibid). According to Richard Ansah and Modestha Mensah, radical communalism is built on three main pillars: First, the individual is naturally a social being rooted in the community. This view is referred to as the inseparability thesis in Plato's language as found in *The Republic*. The point here is that the individual's social nature is dictated by nature itself. This means that the individual can only exist and act in the society. Therefore, this inseparable thesis denies the individual liberty because the self is always defined by the community. Secondly, the community is morally superior to the individual. In other words, common good/social responsibilities are preferable to individual rights. This view is termed as primacy thesis. Lastly, individual rights are surplus in any community that is regulated by shared values, mutual understanding and love (Richard & Modestha, 2018). In order to understand deeply the communitarian concept of person, we shall address the proponents of this school.

2.1.1. Tempels' African Ontology

In the understanding of Placid Tempels, African ontology is distinctive and opposed to Western ontology. He states that the concept of individuated entities subsisting apart from each other, do not exist in African society. This implies that African psychology does not conceive man as an individual entity, a force existing by itself apart from its ontological relationship with other living being or any other force around it(Tempels, 1959). In this sense, African person is neither an independent entity nor appears as an isolated individual. Every individual in African society, forms a link in the chain of *vital-forces* (used to mean being); a living link, active and passive, joined from above to the ascending line of his ancestry and sustaining below him the line of his descendants. This means that African person operates within the parameters of the community. According to Tempels, relationship among individuals is neither viewed as simply juridical dependence, nor kinship. It should be rather understood in the realm of ontological dependence (ibid).

In the sequence of vital force, Tempels claims that it is the nature of *Muntu* (Baluba's term for man) to increase or decrease ontologically. He has capacity to become stronger and greater ontologically. On the other side, *Muntu* can also diminish ontologically. His increase or decrease in ontology depends on social standing which is extracted from his relationship with other forces. This means that one can increase or diminish his vital force or end up in complete annihilation of his very essence, the paralysis of his vital force, which takes from him the power to be active (ibid). At the point of death, according to Tempels, African person loses his vital force and he thus depends on the living relatives to renew it. It is therefore, the duty of the living relatives of the deceased, to renew his vital force through ceremonial activities in order to initiate him in the ancestral world (ibid). This is done because ancestral world has no automatic entry. Tempels argues that the *vital force* is the essence of African person. It is the essence of connectivity of individuals. In this sense, one who adheres to the connectivity of individuals, is viewed as a full person.

2.1.2. John Mbiti's Concept of Person

African person cannot exist alone except corporately. He owes his existence to other including the contemporaries and the long departed. Mbiti argues that African person is simply part of the whole. The society therefore makes, creates, and produces a human person. One may talk about the physical birth which indeed is not enough in African settings to speak about the human person. In this sense, Mbiti claims that the child must go through rites of incorporation for full integration in the entire society. Just as God created the first man, so does the community make an individual who finally after the rites of incorporation becomes a social being. It is in the society that one becomes conscious of his own being, duties, privileges, and responsibilities towards himself and others. In this sense, when one suffers or rejoices, he does not do so alone but with the entire society, whether yet unborn, living or living-dead. In this case, children not only belong to the parents but also to the kinsmen. That's why in African society, every member is entitled to correct young ones and impart discipline in them. This means, whatever happens to the individual, happens to the whole society, and vice versa. Thus, the individual can only say: 'I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am"(John, 1969). This is the cardinal point in the understanding of the African concept of person.

2.1.3. Ifeanyi Menkiti's Concept of African Person

In the article *Person and Community in African Traditional Thought*, Menkiti seeks to articulate the concept of person found in African traditional thought. He underlines significant contrasts between Africa, and Western concept of person. First, he states that

while Western views of man abstract this or that feature of the lone individual and then proceed to make it the defining or essential characteristic which entities aspiring to the description "man " must have, the African view of man denies that persons can be defined by focusing on this or that physical or psychological characteristic of the lone individual. Rather, man is defined by reference to the environing community (Menkiti, 1984).

Menkiti concurs with Mbiti in the sense that African concept of the person can be summed up in this statement: *I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am* (John, African Religions and Philosophies, 1970).This dictum confers that as far as African society is concerned; the reality of the communal world takes precedence over the reality of individual. Menkiti claims that Mbiti's dictum is meant to apply not only in ontological parameters, but also in regard to epistemic accessibility. According to him, this understanding is deeply rooted in the ongoing African human community. Therefore, Menkiti contends that the crucial distinction between African concept of person and the concept of person found in Western thought is that in the African view; it is the community that defines the person as person, not some isolated static quality of rationality, will, or memory (Menkiti, 1984).

Secondly, Menkiti argues that in African society, an individual becomes person only after a process of incorporation so that without incorporation into this or that community, an individual is considered to be mere dangler to whom the description of personhood does not fully apply. In this sense, personhood is not something given simply because one is born of human seed. It is rather achieved in life time. According to Menkiti, the process of incorporation implies social and ritual activities which are orderly done to the individual until he attains the full complement of excellences. He subsequently opines that the community during this long process of attainment, plays a vital role as catalyst and prescriber of norms (Menkiti, 1984). In this sense, according Menkiti the concept of personhood cannot be reduced to one slogan like the *Cartesian corgito ergo sum* (I think therefore I am).

African concept of personhood for Menkiti does not attempt to find a certain character or certain isolated characteristics in all individuals. It is rather the task of the community to describe an individual in accordance to the adherence to the norms stipulated by the society at hand. Western concept of person according to Menkiti adopts what

might be described as a minimal definition of the person. This means in Western understanding, whoever has soul, or rationality, or will, or memory, is seen as or entitled to the description of person. Contrary, he asserts that African concept of person reaches what might be described as a maximal definition of the person. He states that

> as far as African societies are concerned, personhood is something at which individuals could fail, at which they could be competent or ineffective, better or worse. Hence, Africa emphasized 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 all the inbuilt excellences implied by the term (Menkiti, 1984).

Menkiti argues that personhood is not received or simply given at the very beginning of one's life. It is rather attained after one is well along in the society. According to Menkiti, the older the individual the more of a person he becomes. He cites an Igbo proverb which says: *What an old man sees sitting down, a young man cannot see even when he climbs a tree.* This proverb applies not only to an incremental growth of wisdom as one ages but also the gathering of the excellences which society considers as prerequisite for a full attainment of personhood. This claim implies two things: first the existence of qualitative difference between old man and young man. Second one is that there are some sort of ontological progressions that take place from infancy to old age. English language supports this notion. For instance, children and infancies are referred as it. We cannot refer the same to a grown up man (Menkiti, 1984). After birth, the individual is made to go through the different rites of incorporation such as initiation at puberty time, before attaining a full personhood according to the understanding of the community (Menkiti, 1984). Therefore, personhood is something which has to be attained in a direct proportion as one participates in community activities. According to Menkiti, it is through carrying out one's obligations that transforms the "it-status" of early childhood which is marked by an absence of moral function, to the "person-status" of later years, marked by a widened maturity of ethical sense without which personhood is conceived as eluding one (Menkiti, 1984).

Western concept of community, is nothing more than a mere collection of self-interested persons, each with private set of preferences, who come together because they realize, that in association they can accomplish things which they are not able to accomplish otherwise. For Menkiti, whenever the term community or society is used in African sense, we are convicted to think of the aggregated sum of individuals encompassing it. In this sense, when Mbiti says *I am because we are*, the 'we' refers to not an additive 'we' but a thoroughly fused collective "we" (Menkiti, 1984). Menkiti further distinguishes two main kinds of human grouping: collectivities in the truest sense, and constituted human groups.

African understanding of human society assumes the collectivities in the truest sense. The Western understanding on the other side falls closer to description found in the constituted human groups. He notes that the collectivities in the truest sense are an organic dimension to the relationship between the component individuals. On the other side, the constituted human groups is a non-organic bringing together of atomic individuals into a unit more of an association than a community. Therefore, for Menkiti, African view of the community assumes an ontological independence to human society whereby it moves from society to individuals whereas the Western view on the other side moves from individuals to society (Menkiti, 1984).

*2.2. Moderate Communalism*

It is a school advocated by Kwame Gyekye. He argues that although man is a social being by nature, he does not entirely depend on the community for personhood. This means that personhood is not determined only by the community. In this sense, it is neither the individual nor the community is greater than the other (Obioha, 2014). Rather, according to Gyekye, there is a symbiotic relationship between the community and the individual for the purpose of advancing the good of the individual as well as for the community. Radical Communalism emphasizes on the activity and success of the wider society rather than that of the individual (Kwame, 1987). Gyekye on the other hand claims that moderate communalism balances communal values and individual values by ensuring that the individual does not get consumed in the community. The individual's freedom is guaranteed within the community which gives the opportunity to plan, and work for the attainment personal goals and objectives. According to Gyekye, moderate communalism aims at ensuring that individual values are attained, protected and accommodated within the community (Kwame, 1992).

In *Traditions and Modernity,* Gyekye argues that individual is an inherently communal being, embedded in a context of social relationships and interdependence, and never isolated. However, he states that the individual owns other attributes, which are; rationality and the capacity to evaluate and make moral judgments (Kwame, 1997). This means that man is also rational being with moral sense, and capacity to arrive at virtue. This implies that although the individual is social by nature, he is as well rational by nature (Kwame, 1997). Thus, the argument for Gyekye is that if the individual's mental feature plays a vital role in the formation and execution of his goals, plans to achieve his objectives, as well as for the community, then it cannot be contended that the individual is wholly constituted by social relationships. Gyekye's claim here is that the individual is separable from the community (Kwame, 1992).

## 3. Ontological School of Thought

This school describes the notion of personhood from innate perspective. It deals with analysis of the constituent physical parts and non-physical of the human person (Godfrey, 2002).It eschews all social relations, community rights and obligations, and moral achievement in the definition of man. It rather seeks to understand human person as an independent entity with certain characteristics which distinguish him from other living beings (Bernard, 2008). The best example of this school is found in Akan tradition.

*3.1. Akan Ontological Concept of Person*

According Kwame Gyekye, man is a composite of three parts: *okra*, *sunsum*, and *honam*. Okra is the soul which constitutes the innermost self. O*kra* is the essence of an individual in Akan community. In this sense, okra is the living soul and thus it is identical with life. It is the spark of the divine in the person. (Kwame,1987). *Honhom* (human body) is an element which according to Akan community is closely related to okra. It is referred to mean breath. Bernard Matolino finds Gyekye arguing that the departure of the breath is the departure of the soul which marks the termination of individual's life (Bernard, 2008). *Sunsum* on the other side is the basis of a person's personality. It is because of *sunsum* that we say Kamau is honesty, generous, kind, and disobedient. This concept in Gyekye's understanding involves the idea of a set of characteristics as demonstrated in a person's behaviour-thought, feelings, actions, extra (Kwame,1987). The claim for Gyekye is that *sunsum* is not a physical thing but rather psychological. The physical entity in a person according to him is the body which is noticeable to those who have sight. It could be concluded that man is therefore according to Akan community constituted by two main principle substances: spiritual, and physical.

## 4. Impact of African Concept of Person on Human Thinking

From the above presentation, it is clear that African concept of person is inevitably communitarian despite of alien influence incurred by the continent due to colonization and globalization. Ontological concept of personhood is a copy and paste concept of thought which regardless of its origin, suffocates in Africa. It is a translation of western view of personhood to local languages. Although it has been baptized, Africanized, and presented in local languages, we should not forget its origin. It is a Western thought adopted by Africans and beautifully Africanized.

African person is a communitarian being. He is understood in the context of the community. This implies that without community mentality, one ceases to be African. This is where and how the homogeneous mindset within the continent gets its genesis. Community mindset is a *vital force* which must be adhere to by each member of African society. Community is the carrier and giver of human essence. One is therefore bound to operate within the parameters of the community to maintain and sustain his connectivity with other forces in the society. If otherwise, then one loses his human essence. The individual is bound to think in line with the community in order to secure his essence and connectivity with other individuals. There is no life outside the community; the *Vital force*. The *Vital force* gives life and solves African problems. The more you adhere to community, the more your life force increases. The *Vital Force* is a mystical world which comprises of the unborn, living, and living-dead. One's existence is therefore explained depending on how he adheres to the mystical world. This implies that the scientific world is wrapped into the mystical world and so the problems have to be solved not by appealing to science but rather through connecting oneself with the mystical world. This explains why the continent is less sensitive to the scientific world.

African leaders; the elders are the symbol of the mystical world. They are the custodian of wisdom and knowledge. Therefore, challenging an African leader, is actually challenging the *Vital force*; the bearer and giver of life, wisdom and knowledge. This is how homogenous thinking has triumphed and remains conspicuous in the continent. African man has no prior definition. He is defined by his community according moral conduct which he exhibits. Therefore, it is the kingship community that defines him. So if one has to be defined, he has to appease the social norms given by the mystical world. That is why, heterogeneous thinking in Africa continent lost its existence. The solution of one's problems has to be traced in the mystical world; the collectivity of individuals. Mbiti's concept of time, elucidates intensively how African problems are solved. Before deliberating the African concept of time according to Mbiti, this article draw line of demarcation on concept of time between Africa and Western civilization.

The two civilizations experience dissension in the understanding the notion of time. Western concept of time is mathematical, linear and abstract. In this case, Aristotle defines time as number of motion according to before and after (Ursula, 2005). Aristotle's time encompasses past, present and future. Future has no connection with the world of experience but mind makes it real. That's why future for Westerns is a real entity. It is experiential just as past and present. To have a plan of sixty years to come is not a problem. This concept stimulated heterogeneous approach of things and suppressed homogeneous thinking. Solution of problems in West has nothing to do with the past. Heterogeneous approach of things communicates that future is the only custodian of knowledge and wisdom. With this approach, there was a murder of conformity to past and cyclical mentality, and therefore people were left free to think. This approach created room for diversity in terms of thinking.

African time according to Mbiti is phenomenal. It is composed by events. Time and events is one and the same thing. Time is therefore a composition of events. In this sense, there is no African time without events (Parratt, 2011). For him, African time is experiential and cannot be projected. It is of two dimensions; long past and the passing now. It begins with past and ends with now. Therefore, future does not exist in African time because it has no event that produces time. According to Mbiti, past for an African is a mystical world; the world of ancestors. Solution of African problems is to be found in the past. The ancestors are the custodian of wisdom and knowledge. When problems arise, an African has two things to do; either to invoke ancestors who are the bearers of wisdom and knowledge or review the past in order to relate ideas because things are necessary related and connected. The solution one problem is applicable to another. This means that to have knowledge and wisdom is to be in harmony with the mystical world. This explains Mbiti's dictum that *Africans are notorious religious*. In this sense, there was murder of heterogeneous thinking and exaltation of homogeneous mentality. The individual has to conform to the collective mentality; the giver of life and wisdom.

To think differently in African society, is to commit the sin of alienation. Homogeneous mentality adored, lacks tools that accommodates change. That is the reason why new ideas that embraces future, have no room in the continent. Africa is hostile for free thinking. This is why when one embraces intellectual conversion and strains to get rid of all shells

of appeasement mentality, is immediately assassinated, rejected, and exiled and if in power, overthrown just as they did to the great Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana. Homogeneous thinking got rooted and as results, 'absolution' of the kingship with political, ethical and divine authority got erected as well. According to Mbiti, this also created ontological hierarchy: God, Ancestors, Grandparents, parents, Children and the Unborn. It also provided foundation for political and social life in sense of solidarity, togetherness, fellow feeling and extended family. Conformity mentality reigns in the African continent and sign of its departure remains unnoticeable.

## 5. Conclusion

Man is born and dies in the community. Thus, he can only operate in the society in which he finds himself. The claims of this article are that Africa is a communitarian society animated by collective temperament. Communal framework in the continent provides ambiance for collective instinct. Therefore, the argument of this study is that African person is essentially communitarian being who operates within social framework. He lives among his brethren and he is ready to die in order to be reborn in the other. This means that his existence is wrapped in the parameters of symbiosis.

## 6. References

i. Bernard, M. (2008). The Concept of Person in African Political Philosophy: Abalytical and Evaluation. KwaZulu-Natal: University of KwaZulu-Natal Pieternaritzburg Campus.
ii. Godfrey, I. O. (2002). The Universal and the Particular in Wiredu's Philosophy of Human Nature. In O. Olusegun, Third Way in African Philosophy: Eassy in Honour of Kwasi Wiredu (p. 74). Ibadan: Hope Publication.
iii. John, M. (1969). African Religion, and Philosophy. Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers Ltd.
iv. John, M. (1970). African Religions and Philosophies. New York: Doubleday.
v. Kwame, G. (1987). An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme. New York: Cambridge University Press.
vi. Kwame, G. (1987). An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
vii. Kwame, G. (1992). Person and Community in African Thought. In W. Kwasi, & K. Gyekye, Person and Community: Ghanaian Philosophical Studies (pp. 56-78). Washington: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy.
viii. Kwame, G. (1992). Person and Community in African Thought. In W. Kwasi, & K. Gyekye, Person and Community: Ghanaian Philosophical Studies (pp. 56-78). Washington: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy.
ix. Kwame, G. (1997). Tradition and Modernity. New York: Oxford University Press.
x. Menkiti, I. (1984). Person and Community in African Traditional Thought. In W. A. Richard, African Philosophy: An Introduction (p. 17). Lanham: University Press of America.
xi. Munamato, C. (2018). African Communitarianism and Human Rights. Theoria, 37-56.
xii. Obioha, P. U. (2014). A Communitarian Understanding of the Human Person as a Philosophical Basis for Human Development. The Journal of Pan African Stadies, 247-262.
xiii. Oded, B. (1999). Plato and Protagoras: Truth and Relativism in Ancient Greek Philosophy. New York: Lexington.
xiv. Parratt, J. (2011). Time in African Traditional Thought. Taylor & Francis Online, 117-126.
xv. Richard, A., & Modestha, M. (2018). Richard Ansah & Modestha MeGyekye's Moderate Communitarianism: A Case of Radical Communitarianism in Disguise. UJAH, 63-64.
xvi. Tempels, P. (1959). Bantu Philosophy. Paris: Presence Africaine.
xvii. Ursula, C. (2005). Time for Aristotle: Physics. London: Oxford Scholarship.