

**THE NOTION OF THE HUMAN PERSON IN IFEANYI MENKITI'S  
PHILOSOPHY**

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**BEING A RESEARCH WORK SUBMITTED TO  
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**DEC., 2022**

## CERTIFICATION

This is to certify that this research work titled **THE NOTION OF THE HUMAN PERSON IN IFEANYI MENKITI'S PHILOSOPHY** was carried out by **ONYEMAECHE CHIFUNANYA MERCY (ART1701688)** in the Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Arts, University of Benin, Benin City.

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## **DEDICATION**

For my parents,  
Mr. and Mrs. Lucky Abaigbe

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My special and profound gratitude goes first to God Almighty for his provisions and protection over my life. My sincere and utmost appreciation goes to my parents Mr. and Mrs. Abaigbe lucky for their love and support throughout my course of study.

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A special appreciation goes to my beloved father Mr. Abaigbe O. Lucky , my mother mother Mrs. Blessing Abaigbe for their unceasing care and love towards me; I pray that God grants you long life, to yield in full, the fruit of your labour.

To my uncle Mr. Sunday Abaigbe for his moral and financial support, care and understanding during my period of study. I also use this medium to appreciate my wonderful siblings; Favour and Goodluck I love u both love you all.

To my friends Ogbolu Stella, Asare Naomi and chiemeze Zara;

Thanks for always being there for me .

**ONYEMAECHI C. M.**

**ART1701688**

**Dec., 2022**

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## **Abstract**

*Over the years different philosophers have proffered answers to the question “who is a person?” However, given the contradictory theories offered by these various thinkers such as Rene Descartes, Segun Gbadegesin, Kwame Gyekye and Mogobe Ramose, the problem seems to have eluded any attempt at resolving it. In African philosophy, Wiredu’s idea of the Akan notion of a person marks a watershed to the discuss on a personhood.resent scholars like Osemwengie and Asia explored the Edo notion of a person and Obinyan on his part examined the notion of Oria in Esan ontology. However, with the method of hermeneutics, this study crystallizes Ifeanyi Menkiti’s notion of a person and argues with the fact in forms a defense and a better approach to the problem of personhood. This work concludes in line with Menkiti that an understanding of the qualitative relationship between a person and a community cannot be ignored in defining personhood.*

# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

What is a person? Different answers have been given to this question. One of the best known is perhaps the answer of the French philosopher, René Descartes (1591–1650), that a person is a combination of two radically different sub-stances, matter (i.e. a body) which is extended in space, and mind with thinking as its essential characteristic and which does not occupy space. This theory brought a whole range of problems in its wake, such as that of the interaction between these two radically different substances (to account for human action for example), and that of other minds—how we can ever be sure of the other bodies we meet being ‘inhabited’ by minds? In general this is an unacceptable account of the nature of a person. Menkiti sees this as a reduction of the person to ‘some isolated static quality of rationality, will or memory’.<sup>1</sup> In line with Wiredu’s suggestion of ‘strategic particularization’, the stratification of the person has received a lot of attention in African metaphysical thinking. A striking feature of these

analyses is the differences between them. There are even contradictions between accounts of conceptions of the same cultural group. For example, Wiredu argues that thinking is not part of the spiritual aspect of the person. He even remarks that this Metaphysical thinking in Africa prevented the Akan from committing the category mistake of confusing concept and entity, as happened in the case of Western philosophy. Gyekye, again, specifically makes thinking part of the spiritual aspect of the person. In spite of such differences, there are a few general points which can be made here.

The notion of “personhood” or “being a person” is understood in many African languages and societies as an acquired status that is dependent upon people’s relationship to their community. To paraphrase Kuckertz (in Osemwengie and Asia) African thought and philosophy on personhood and selfhood is that the ‘I’ belongs to the I-You-correspondence as a stream of lived experience without which it could not be thought and would not exist.

Although the community plays an important part, Raditlhalo states, for example:

A child is held to be the property of the community, and it is the community who are going to see to it that the individual child becomes a significant member of the community, an asset to all.<sup>2</sup>

As Ifeanyi Menkiti noted, “personhood” is characterize as follows: The various societies found in traditional Africa routinely accept this fact that personhood is the sort of thing which has to be attained, and is attained in direct proportion as one participates in communal life through the discharge of the various obligations defined by one’s stations. It is the carrying out of these obligations that transforms one from the it-status of early child-hood, marked by an absence of moral function, into the person-status of later years, marked by a widened maturity of ethical sense—an ethical maturity without which personhood is conceived as eluding one.<sup>3</sup>

African societies are said to be communalistic and a perfect example of Mbiti’s thesis that “I am, because we are, and since we are, therefore, I am.” Didier Kaphagawani apt captures this African communalism when he writes that:

...to assert African communalism is not in any way to imply the denial of recognition of individual human beings qua

individuals. African communalism in fact takes cognisance of ontological pluralism; and to assert, as Mbiti does, that we are, presumes prior recognition of the individuality of those making up the we.<sup>4</sup>

A notable feature of the notion of personhood in Africa is the element of guardian spirit. Chinua Achebe aptly captures this when he writes of the Igbo concept of *chi* (guardian angel, personal spirit or spirit double) as the complementing aspect of a person, thereby positing that “nothing can stand alone, there must always be another thing standing beside it.”<sup>5</sup> For Wesley Osemwegie and Emmanuel Asia it is the *ehi* that moods the *omwa* thus emphasized that for the Bini, there must be a harmony between *omwa* and his *ehi*, otherwise the *omwa* will not be successful in his journey in life. In the same vein, Achebe writes that:

...the Igbo believe that when a man says yes his *chi* will also agree; but not always. Sometimes a man may struggle with all his power and say yes most emphatically and yet nothing he attempts will succeed.<sup>6</sup>

With the above, one sees African philosophy filled with conflicting ideas as to what or who should be consider a person. A notable element in African discourse of a person is according to Menkiti;

A crucial distinction thus exists between the African view of man and the view of man found in Western thought:

in the African view it is the community which defines the person as person, not some isolated static quality of rationality, will, or memory.<sup>7</sup>

In this project our aim is to lean on Menkiti's view of a person to argue that personhood is culturally defined and the attainment of personhood is 'fully embedded' in a cultural community. As such, the community determines the personhood of its members. On this note, Balogun writing about the Yoruba conception of a person cautions "if the Yoruba do not propose a single entity as the substantial organ responsible for all mental activities, then they cannot have the equivalence of "mind" in their language.<sup>8</sup>

## **1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

The question: who is a person? Has perplexed philosophers over the years, and although so many answers have been proffered, the end of the debate seems not to be insight given the different conflicting theories proposed by different scholars. In a nutshell, the question still remains: who is a person? How does Menkiti construe the human person? How tenable is Menkiti's position and has Menkiti solved the problem of personhood?

### **1.3 METHODOLOGY**

The method of hermeneutic is adopted in this study. Hermeneutics simply means reinterpretation and it will enable us to critically interpret the key text which will enrich the discourse by noting the submission of scholars on the question of personhood in Africa and furthermore it will assist us in asserting our position on the issue. This work is divided into four chapters. Chapter one will introduce the work. It will discuss the general view of personhood and review some key literatures. Chapter two will examine Menkiti's biography with particular reference to his education and influences. Also, in chapter two, we shall attempt to provide the Dualistic conception of the human person in Descartes philosophy as an introduction to Menkiti's work. Chapter three examines Menkiti's communitarian man with emphasis on his notion of ethics, justice and non-person (it). In chapter four we shall attempt to evaluate our views and make a concluding remarks.

### **1.4 SCOPE OF THE STUDY**

This work is limited to the question of personhood in Africa. it does not exhaust the epistemological and ethical issues involved on being a

person. Rather it explores the metaphysical question of what makes one a person. This work uses Ifeanyi Menkiti's work as bedrock for its ontological thinking on personhood in Africa.

### **1.5 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

This work is significant for two reasons. First it reopens discussion on the metaphysical question of who is a person in African philosophy? Secondly, it exposes the reader to Ifeanyi Menkiti's communalistic conception of a person.

### **1.6 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this study is to examine the question of who a person is especially as articulated by Menkiti. This work attempts to settle the question of the status of a person African philosophy.

### **1.7 LITERATURE REVIEW**

Contemporary African philosophers have wrestled with the question "who is a person?" Or "what is it that constitutes a person?" Here, we aim to

review some of the major views of African scholars which they expressed in their books, chapters in books and journal articles.

In traditional Yoruba thought, a necessary condition for an individual to be a person is that it has taken on a destiny. In “Outline of a theory of Destiny,” Segun Gbadegesin puts forth the thesis that when viewed under the guise of modern philosophical rigor, the traditional Yoruba concept of destiny seems to bring with it more conceptual problems than its usage is otherwise thought to help explain. His concerns are with an apparent inconsistency in held beliefs, with traditional folk African culture, about what it means to have a destiny. He tries to account for how one makes sense of the tenet that having a destiny fixes one’s life experiences with the tenet that one can be held responsible for one’s actions. He is concerned also with what it means to choose a destiny, and with whether it is appropriate to say of something that does not have a destiny that it is a person.<sup>9</sup> He examined the effect of this one the notion of freewill and determinism.

In “Personal Identity in African Metaphysics” Leke Adeofe explores some of the issues involved in discussing what it is to be a person within the

context of a Yoruba metaphysical worldview. He focused on what is the nature of persons? What is it for a person to be the same persisting entity across time? What relationship, if any, exists between an individual's first-person subjective experiences and our objective third-person perspective? He characterizes Yoruba thought as having a tripartite conception of persons, while arguing that it does not fall prey to criticisms that have plagued notable Western conceptions of persons such as those paraded by Descartes, Hume, and Locke. He discussed the variants of persons embedded in the works of these scholars in the light of Yoruba conceptions of a person relying solely on the linguistic evidence of the Yoruba conceptual structure.<sup>10</sup>

Moving away from this Yoruba conception of a person, Obi Oguejiofor explored the Igbo conception of a person. In his "Eschatology, Immortality and Igbo Philosophy of Life," Oguejiofor emphasized the anthropocentric nature of Igbo world-view. He explores the Igbo view of *chi*, *mmadu*, ancestorhood, and immortality. For him, "Menkiti tends to understand immortality in the social sense. Parents who beget children somehow immortalize themselves in their children."<sup>11</sup>

Beyond this Yoruba and Igbo conceptions of a person, Dismaris A. Masolo's "The Concept of the Person in Luo Modes of Thought," begins with a characteristic of a salient influences of European colonialism on traditional conceptual idioms of Luo modes of thought. He discusses what he sees as external cultural impositions. Although he discussed political and ethical issues, his major focused is in the area of metaphysics and epistemology where he focused upon conceptions of personhood and personal identity. He contended that in many African systems of thought, conceptions of personhood and personal identity often exceed the confinement of the two Cartesian categories – mind and body, this he based on the works of Jackson and Karp and Wiredu and Gyekye. He examined the notion of 'jouk' that is found among the Luo and its implications on understanding what constitutes personhood, for grounding the principles of moral discourse on judgement and compared the Luo, Yoruba and Akan ontological commitments.

Wesley Osemwegie and Emmanuel Asia's "The Bini concept of a Person: A Hermeneutical Approach," must be commended for their brilliant insight that the human person otherwise known as "omwan" is a product of

the community and despite the fact that ‘omwan’ has both body and spirit that this dualism is not watertight as given in Cartesian dualism. For they “personhood is culturally defined, the attainment of personhood is fully embedded in a cultural community.”<sup>12</sup> Lebisa Teffo and Abraham Roux’s “Themes in African metaphysics” is very instructive in understanding the ontology of Africans. They attempted to investigate and proffer answers to vexing philosophical propositions such as “Why does lightning kill people and destroy property? Why are some people successful whereas others, despite their efforts, fail? Why do innocent and good people become ill and die?”<sup>13</sup> Some of the themes that investigated include, God, Ancestors, Witchcraft, Personhood, Dualism Destiny.

Segun Gbadegesin discusses all these problems in connection with, and also the possible interpretations of the idea of destiny. He concludes that destiny has two aspects, the individual’s character and the influence of society, but in the end it is the influence and the demands of society that are really at stake:

Persons are what they are in virtue of what they are destined to be, their character and the communal influence on them.... A

person whose existence and personality is dependent on the community is expected in turn to contribute to the continued existence of the community.... The meaning of one's life is therefore measured by one's commitment to social ideals and communal existence.<sup>14</sup>

## **1.8 DEFINITION OF TERMS**

### **1.8.1 African Philosophy**

Although the debate is now stale, the prefix of “African” to philosophy has been questioned. However, given the submissions of the various scholars and the affirmation of the existence of African philosophy, we could define African philosophy as the critical understanding of the problems and marvels that confront the Africans. It is simply the African response to Western discourse of Africans.

### **1.8.2 Person**

The human person according to Boethius is the individual substance of a rational being. However, in this project, person is only retain to the human species and it is also conceive to be a thinking or rational being. Person in the context of this work could be either male or female.

### **1.8.3 Personhood**

As used in this project, personhood is the concept or notion that covers the question of what makes an individual a human being. Is it the community or the individual's act or both?

### **1.8.4 Monism and Dualism**

Monism is the metaphysical term that holds that the human person is made of one substance. Dualism on the other hand, is the metaphysical concept that holds that a person is made of two substances; matter and form, or body and mind. Although there are various other definitions, in this project, dualism is taken from the Cartesian understanding.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Menkiti, I. “Person and Community in African Traditional Thought,” in Wright, R. A. (ed.) *African Philosophy: An Introduction* (New York: University Press, 1984 ), p. 176

<sup>2</sup> Raditlhalo, T. “Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person,” *Journal of Philosophy*, 1996, p. 123

<sup>3</sup> Menkiti, I. *Op.Cit.* p.176

<sup>4</sup> *Loc. Cit.*

<sup>5</sup> Achebe, C. “Chi” in Igbo Cosmology reprinted in *African Philosophy An Anthology* edited by E. C. Eze (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1998), p. 67

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*; p. 69

<sup>7</sup> Menkiti, I. *Op. Cit.* p. 172

<sup>8</sup> Balogun, O. A. “The Yoruba Concept of Person,” in *Journal of Afro-European Studies*, Vol. 3, 2 (2009) p. 14

<sup>9</sup> Gbadegesin, S. “An Outline of a Theory of Destiny,” in L. M. Brown, *African Philosophy: New and Traditional Perspectives*, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004) p. 126

<sup>10</sup> Adeofe, L. “Personal Identity in African Metaphysics,” in L. M. Brown, *African Philosophy: New and Traditional Perspectives*, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004) p. 126

<sup>11</sup> Oguejiofor, O. “Eschatology, Immortality and Igbo Philosophy of Life,” *Bigard Theological Studies*, July – Dec., Vol. 16, No. 2, 1996, p. 190

<sup>12</sup> Osemwegie, W.T. and E. Asia “The Bini Concept of a person: A Hermeneutical Approach,” in *Contemporary Humanities*, Vol. 9, Sept., 2016, p.190

<sup>13</sup> Coetzee, P. H. and A.P.J. Roux (ed.) *The African Philosophy Reader*, London: Routledge, 1998), p. 192

<sup>14</sup> Gbadegesin, S. *Op. Cit.* p. 367

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## CHAPTER TWO

### BACKGROUND TO MENKITI'S PHILOSOPHY

#### 2.1 Ifeanyi Menkiti: Life, Works and Influences

Ifeanyi Menkiti was born in Onitsha, Nigeria.<sup>1</sup> He came to the United States in 1961 to attend Pomona College on the ASPAU program (African Scholarship Program of American Universities) and won the F.S. Jennings Distinguished Senior Thesis Award for his thesis on Ezra Pound. After Pomona, he attended Columbia University Pulitzer School of Journalism, New York University and Harvard University.<sup>2</sup> Menkiti holds a master's degrees from Columbia University and New York University and a Ph.D from Harvard University. At Harvard, he studied with the philosopher John Rawls, who supervised his doctoral dissertation.<sup>3</sup> Ifeanyi Menkiti teaches courses in the area of Medical Ethics, Philosophy of Law, Philosophy of Literature, and African Philosophy at Wesley College. He joined the faculty in 1973.<sup>4</sup> He has published articles on philosophical issues in such journals as *The Philosophical Forum*, *The Journal of Value Inquiry*, *The Harvard Educational Review*, and *The Journal of the American Academy of*

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*Religion*.<sup>5</sup> In 1975 he was honored with a fellowship in poetry from the Massachusetts State Council on the Arts and Humanities, followed in 1978 by an award from the National Endowment for the Arts.<sup>6</sup> In 1996, Menkiti was awarded the Pinanski Prize for Excellence in Teaching from Wesley College.<sup>7</sup> He has published three volumes: *Affirmations* (1971), *The Jubilation of Falling Bodies* (1978), and *Of Altar, the Bright Light* (2005).<sup>8</sup> The editors of Earthwinds Press called his poetry “fresh, engaging and full of surprises. The poems are tough, serious, and often come at you with a whimsical twist or a biting satire. The reader is struck by the energy of the poems, as well as by their unwavering historical sense.”<sup>9</sup> Menkiti serves on the board of overseers of the Mt. Auburn Hospital, Cambridge, Massschuensset, a Harvard University affiliated teaching hospital, and is a past trustee. He has also served on the boards of the Greater Boston Youth Pro Musica, the Cambridge Arts Council and Revels, Inc. In 2013, he became a member of the Agbalanze Society of the Kingdom of Onitsha, his birthplace.<sup>10</sup> He is the owner of the historic Grolier Poetry Bookshop in Harvard Square.<sup>11</sup> Heller, a correspondent in the Harvard Magazine writes

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that the Grolier store was not at first owned by Menkiti. He gave a chronicle of how it came to be owned by Menkiti. He writes

When Menkiti first walked into the Grolier as a graduate student in 1969, it was owned and run by Gordon Cairnie, a Canadian by birth, whose name overshadows the shop's first half-century. Solano says. If there is any man who knows anything about international poetry and not just the kind that is the flavor of the year, it's Professor Menkiti. The potential, she says, is huge; if Menkiti successfully harness his knowledge of world poetry, he could create a revolution in taste.<sup>12</sup>

Bloom gave a vivid description of Menkiti's personality when she writes:

He is a large man, with a deep voice, heavy Nigerian accent, and importantly looking beard. Pund, he continues, was very interested in real-world questions, whether concerning World War I or China. Some of Menkiti's other favourite poets, such as Christopher Okigbo and David Ferry, also engage the aesthetic in order to better understand the political and the historical. To Menkiti, philosophy, like poetry, is not merely a self-indulgent effort. He hates the saying that philosophy bakes no bread. "It doesn't have to shout," he says. "There are lots of problems in the world. To think that philosophy and literature don't have anything to do with (fixing them) is wrongheaded." It was for this reason that Menkiti enjoyed studying under political theorist John Rawls, who laid out something, then defended it with great analytical rigor.<sup>13</sup>

She conclusively stated that Menkiti's work in literature and philosophy functions on the belief that, beyond their intellectual richness, they are

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relevant to the world in ways outside of the aesthetic.<sup>14</sup> Menkiti and his wife Carol Bowers make their home in Somerville, Massachusetts, and have four children: Nneka, Obiora, Enuma and Ndidi; and three grandchildren: Braxton, Carter and Clayton.<sup>15</sup>

### **2.3 The Concept of a Person in Wiredu's Philosophy**

Wiredu's account of a person is seen in the Akan concept of personhood, ethics and in the numerous works he wrote on African philosophy, including his political thoughts where he postulated a non-party system that is based on consensus instead of the current practice of majority carries the vote.

He argues that "a communalist outlook seems to be quite widespread in traditional life on the continent. This would lead one to expect a certain type of ethical orientation."<sup>16</sup> We note that a proper understanding of the views of Wiredu on communalism, there is need to investigate the background of his postulations which is the concept of personhood among the Akans of Ghana. They hold a highly communitarian views of personhood, Thus:

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For the Akan, judgments about personhood are not matter of merely academic interest, but play an important role in shaping and supporting their highly communal social structure. To the extent that the Akan notion accommodates a common humanity as an innate source of value, it supports moral equality. At the same time, its emphasis on the social bases of personhood helps firmly to embed trust, cooperation, and responsibility to the community in cultural practices. The Akan philosophy of persons thus represents an attempt to resolve questions of identity, freedom, and morality in favor of a communalistic way of life that has evolved as a rational adaptation to the exigencies of survival under harsh conditions.<sup>17</sup>

For Wiredu, "The Akan word *onipo* is an ambiguous term, sometimes referring to a member of a biological species and sometimes, refers instead to a human who has attained a special kind of social status."<sup>18</sup>

According to Wiredu, in Akan society marriage and procreation are a necessary, but not a sufficient condition of personhood. It is important that an individual's household be administered by a joint equal partnership of spouses and that the children are healthy and well nourished. If an individual were to take responsibility for the upbringing of distant relatives or were to shoulder the burden of rearing non-relatives and allow his household to become a magnet for relatives and extended family, then such an individual

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will score very high in personhood, as indicated by references to him as *oye* 'nipa, meaning, he is “a real person” indeed. According to Wiredu;

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.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, such persons who do not meet up to these expectations are treated with dismay as being bad or rightly put as not fit for personhood.

#### **2.4 Descartes Dualistic Conception of the Human person**

Although there are differences with reference to the constituting parts of a person, there is agreement that the person consists basically of a material aspect and a 'spiritual' aspect or aspects. We thus have a dualism with the resulting question of how these different aspects function together. According to Wiredu<sup>20</sup> the question of interaction is not dealt with, but he also points out that we do not have the same kind of problem here as in the case of Descartes. Here it is stated from the start that these spiritual entities have material qualities; there is no radical or categorical difference between

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the spiritual and the material. This, however, raises other problems, such as the true nature of the spiritual and the necessity of postulating such entities if they are not really different; are there different kinds of matter?

More (1996) (in Gyeke) perhaps shows the way out of this difficulty. According to him (at least in the case of the Sotho people) the spiritual is not thought of as ‘some inner force, a mysterious or ghost-like inner power or hidden operations of an occult power which governs the individual’s various general behaviour’. His interpretation is behaviouristic in nature—not the postulation of entities in terms of metaphysical speculation, but what concepts refer to in actual communication. He says: When we describe a person as being ambitious, generous, or even as having a ‘good’ or ‘bad’ character or personality...it is to refer to certain types of tendencies manifested by certain kinds of behaviour pattern which allow us to anticipate, with a reasonable amount of assurance, the individual’s actions and reactions to a variety of circumstances and possible contingencies (More 1996:153).

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This kind of interpretation is more in line with the so-called quest for primary causes, that is, an attempt to understand and integrate events into wider patterns. It is, however, not without problems. There is talk here of ‘tendencies’ and ‘anticipation’. They must in turn be descriptions of behaviour that ascribe tendencies. This means that we do not have an explanation but only a theory about meaning. We know that this does not satisfy the metaphysically inclined. In response to this French philosopher, René Descartes (1591–1650), that a person is a combination of two radically different sub-stances, matter (i.e. a body) which is extended in space, and mind with thinking as its essential characteristic and which does not occupy space. This theory brought a whole range of problems in its wake, such as that of the interaction between these two radically different substances (to account for human action for example), and that of other minds—how we can ever be sure of the other bodies we meet being ‘inhabited’ by minds? In general this is an unacceptable account of the nature of a person. Menkiti sees this as a reduction of the person to ‘some isolated static quality of rationality, will or memory’.<sup>21</sup>

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In line with Wiredu's suggestion of 'strategic particularization', the stratification of the person has received a lot of attention in African metaphysical thinking. A striking feature of these analyses is the differences between them. There are even contradictions between accounts of conceptions of the same cultural group. For example, Wiredu (1987) argues that thinking is not part of the spiritual aspect of the person. He even remarks that this insight prevented the Akan from committing the category mistake of confusing concept and entity, as happened in the case of Western philosophy. Gyekye, again (1978), specifically makes thinking part of the spiritual aspect of the person.<sup>22</sup>

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## Endnotes

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3. ibid
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8. Ibid
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10. Ibid
11. ibid

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<http://www.thecrimson.com/article/2011/12/1/grolier-books-poetry>  
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- 13.Ibid
- 14.Ibid
- 15.K. Wiredu, "Towards Decolonizing African Philosophy and Religions" in African studies Quarterly, Volume 1,issue 4(1998) P. 23
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18. K. Wiredu and Gyekye, "Person and Community" in *Ghanaian Philosophical Studies*, 1992, p.107
19. K. Wiredu, The African Concept of Personhood Op cit

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20. K. Wiredu, The African Concept of Personhood Op cit p.318

21. (Menkiti 1984:172)

22. African Philosophy Reader, 352

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## CHAPTER THREE

### THE CONCEPT OF PERSONHOOD IN MENKITI'S PHILOSOPHY

#### 3.1 The Concept of Communalism in Menkiti's thought

Menkiti's view on communalism is contained in his article: *Person and Community in African Traditional Thought*. He sought to put in proper perspective the place of the person in Africa. This he explained in terms of communitarianism. His approach was that of comparison between the Western and African conception of personhood. For him, unlike the western conception where abstractions are made from lone individuals and such abstractions taken to be the defining yardstick for all men, he hinged his discussion on the writings of Mbiti, maintaining that both the person and the community must be involved in the make-up and build up to personhood; thus he writes:

The first contrast worth noting is that, whereas most 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

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characteristic of the lone individual. Rather, man is defined by reference to the environing community. As John Mbiti notes, the African view of the person can be summed up in this statement: “I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am.”<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, Menkiti sees the reality of the individual as being closely knitted with that of community not just in terms of the ontological make up but also even in epistemology. Language for instance, he avers “is no small factor in the constitution of his mental dispositions and attitude, belong to this or that specific human group”.<sup>2</sup> Self-identity, which is a *do without* in life is also drawn from a community. Thus, one cannot situate himself as being distinct from the community in which he was born or that which he has chosen to identify with.

Menkiti argues that personhood is given by the community and not by any special feature of say, will or rationality as is the case with the western conception. Personhood, that becomes something that is achieved or given not taken. There exists a rigorous process and stages towards the achievement of personhood. One does not become a person just because he was born of a human “seed”, rather, he has to go through the process of

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becoming a person and this is only possible through the instrumentality of the community. He writes:

For personhood is something which has to be achieved, and is not given simply because one is born of human seed... Thus, it is not enough to have before us the biological organism, with whatever rudimentary psychological characteristics are seen as attaching to it. We must also conceive of this organism as going through a long process of social and ritual transformation man. And during this long process of attainment, the community plays a vital role as catalyst and as prescriber of norms<sup>3</sup>.

Menkiti sees the westerners are going for a minimal definition of personhood while the Africans define maximally, personhood. To this end, personhood becomes something someone can be good at or fail, it can be achieved and can be withdrawn. And because personhood is not something that is obtained at birth, but in the later years as one grows, it then means that the older one gets, the more person he becomes. In order to understand this assertion, we note that Menkiti is of the Igbo extraction which as is the case with all African cultures believe that old men are repertoires of knowledge. He showcased this by making reference to an Igbo adage “ihe okenye no nala were fu, nwata kwurugodu, ogaghi ahu ya” (what an old man sees sitting down, a young man cannot see standing up).

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Menkiti moved towards a rugged communitarianism when he tried to give strong backing to his postulations. He writes:

Now, admittedly, the whole idea of ontological progression is something in need of elaboration. Offhand it may not sit very well in the mind of those unaccustomed to the view of personhood being presented here. The temptation might be strong in some quarters to resort that either an entity is a person or it is not; that there can be no two ways about it. In response to this misgiving, let me note that the notion of an acquisition of personhood is supported by the natural tendency in many languages, English included, of referring: to children and new-borns as *it*. Consider this expression: “We rushed the child to the hospital but before we arrived, *it* is dead”. We would never say this of a grown person<sup>4</sup>.

Further, he argues that the same designation is given to people who are dead.

That is the “*it*” designation.

In African societies the ultimate termination of personal existence is also marked by an ‘*it*’ designation; thus, the same depersonalized ‘reference marking the beginning of personal existence also marks the end of that existence also marks the end of that existence. After birth the individual goes through the different rites of incorporation, including those of initiation at puberty time, before becoming a full person in the eyes of the community. And then, of course, there is procreation, old age, death, and entry into the community of departed ancestral spirits-a community viewed as continuous with the community of living men and women, and with which it is conceived as being in constant interaction<sup>5</sup>.

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Thus, while one begins his journey as nothing to person, there also comes to the point of depersonalization; that is the point of death when those who are qualified to become ancestor join them in their world which is not far removed from the world of living. These, Mbiti calls “living dead”<sup>38</sup>. He further argued that there is a point of termination of personal identity that is the time when the names of these ancestors must have been forgotten by numerous generations after them. They join the collective predication ‘ancestors’. This point is debatable as it not relevant again in our contemporary world where the intention of writing and other storage mechanisms makes it possible for us to preserve histories for a very long time.

Menkiti examined the Rawlsian theory of justice as fairness and contrasted them with the western and African notions of personhood. This led him to conclude in last paragraph:

In the African understanding, priority is given to the duties which individuals owe to the collectivity, and their rights, whatever these may be, are seen as secondary to their exercise of their duties. In the West, on the other hand, we find a construal of things in which certain specified rights of individuals are seen as antecedent to the

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organization of society; with the function of government viewed, consequently, as being the protection and defense of these individual rights<sup>6</sup>.

Man, therefore cannot do without his community. African society as described by Menkiti is communitarian. This does not mean for Menkiti that there is nothing like the individual in the society. He rather meant that we draw our individual identities, rights, duties and obligations from the community. When one separates himself from the community, then such a person loses his whole identity and becomes something other than a human being. This is seen in Africa where when one performs good deeds the first question is always “whose child is he?” and the same goes for bad behavior. In some other cases, the question will have to do with the person’s community or place of origin.

### **3.2 Menkiti’s Concept of a Person**

Menkiti in his interesting paper ‘Person and community in traditional African thought’ (1984) deploys arguments to prove that African thought considers personhood as something defined or conferred by the community and as something that must be acquired by the individual.

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Menkiti, infers the notion of acquisition of personhood from the use of the neuter pronoun ‘it’ in many languages, including English, to refer to children and new borns but not to adults. The point he wants to make is that the use of the neuter pronoun for children and new borns means that they are not yet persons—the community has not yet conferred personhood on them. They are now going through the ‘process’ of becoming persons. The inference Menkiti draws would most probably be incorrect for a number of African languages. It is surprising that an inference based on the characteristics of a non-African language is being regarded as having serious implications for African thought. It would have been more instructive and appropriate for him to examine how the neuter pronoun ‘it’ functions in some African languages, and whether it functions in the same way in African languages as it does in English. What he says about the pronoun ‘it’ does not at all apply to the Akan language, for example: the neuter pronoun ‘it’ does not exist in this language for animate things. Thus: ‘He is in the room’ is translated in Akan as *ōwō dan no mu*; ‘she is in the room’ as *ōwōdan no mu*; and ‘it (referring to a dog) is in the room’ also as *ōwōdan no mu*. However, ‘it’ is used for inanimate things. Thus, the answer to one

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question ‘where is the book?’ will be éwó dan no mu, that is, ‘it is in the room’. Thus V is used as the neuter pronoun for only inanimate objects. Children and newly borns are of course not inanimate objects. Since the Akan neuter pronoun ‘ō’ applies to all the three genders (strictly only to a part, i.e. the animate part, of the neuter gender, though), it would follow, on Menkiti’s showing, that not even the adult or oldest person can strictly be referred to as a person! For the answer to the question, ‘where is the old man?’ (if we want to use a pronoun) in Akan will be ōwōdan no mu, that is, ‘he/it is in the room’.

Menkiti also argues that the relative absence of ritualized grief over the death of a child in African societies in contrast to the elaborate burial ceremony and ritualized grief in the event of the death of an older person, also supports his point about the conferment by the community of personhood status. It is not true that every older person who dies in an African community is given elaborate burial. The type of burial and the nature and extent of grief expressed over the death of an older person depend on the community’s assessment, not of his/her personhood as such, but of

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the dead person's achievements in life, his/her contribution to the welfare of the community, and the respect he/she commanded in the community. Older persons who may not satisfy such criteria may in fact be given simple and poor funerals and attenuated forms of grief expressions. As to the absence of ritualized grief on the death of a child, this has no connection whatsoever with the African view of personhood as such, as alleged by Menkiti. It stems rather from beliefs about the possible consequences, for the mother of the dead child, of showing excessive grief: one belief, among the Akan people, is that excessive demonstration of grief in the event of the death of a child will make the mother infertile, as it will make her reach her menopause prematurely, another belief is that the excessive show of grief over the death of a child will drive the dead child too 'far away' for it to reincarnate, and so be reborn; and so on. These beliefs are of course superstitious, but that is beside the point.

Thus no distinctions as to personhood can be made on the basis of the nature and extent of ritualized grief over the death of a child or of an older person. A human person is a person whatever his/her age or social status.

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Personhood may reach its full realization in community, but it is not acquired or yet to be achieved as one goes along in society.

What a person acquires are status, habits, and personality or character traits: he/she, qua person, thus becomes the subject of the acquisition, and being thus prior to the acquisition process, he/she cannot be defined by what he/she acquires. One is a person because of what one is, not because of what one has acquired. Thus, the contrast Menkiti wants to establish between the African and the Western views of the nature of personhood by describing the former as ‘processual’<sup>7</sup> or ‘some sort of ontological progression’<sup>8</sup>, and the latter as grounded on ‘some isolated static quality’<sup>9</sup> is, in opinion of Kwame Gyekye, misguided.<sup>10</sup>

Menkiti in fact accepts the characterization or definition of personhood in terms of moral capacities when he says:

The various societies found in traditional Africa routinely accept this fact that personhood is the sort of thing which has to be attained, and is attained in direct proportion as one participates in communal life through the discharge of the various obligations defined by one’s stations. It is the carrying out of these obligations that transforms one from the it-status of early childhoods, marked by an absence of moral functions, into

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the person-status of later years, marked by a widened maturity of ethical sense—an ethical maturity without which personhood is conceived as eluding one.<sup>11</sup>

This passage According to Kwame Gyekye surely commits Menkiti to saying that a person is defined in terms of ‘some isolated static quality’—the quality of moral sense or capacity in the African case—which he thought was a characteristic of Western conceptions of personhood!<sup>12</sup> Yet to explicate personhood in terms of moral capacities is not to imply by any means that it is the community that fully defines or confers personhood, even though it can be admitted that through such activities as moral instruction, advice, admonition, and the imposition of sanctions the community can be said to play some role in a person’s moral life. Moral capacities as such cannot be said to be implanted or catered for or conferred by the community.

Gyekye turns to other forms of judgements made about persons which are not particularly moral in nature. For him, in the communal setting of the African life, an individual’s social status is measured in terms of:

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1 A person's sense of responsibility, expressed, in turn, through his/her responsiveness and sensitivity to the needs and demands of the group.

2 What a person has been able to achieve through his/her own exertions physical, intellectual, moral.

3 The extent to which a person fulfills certain social norms, such as having a marital life and bringing up children.<sup>13</sup>

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## Endnotes

1. I. Menkiti, *Person and Community in African Traditional Thought* p. 171
2. Ibid 172
3. Ibid
4. Ibid 173
5. Ibid 174
6. Mbiti, *African Religions*, p. 32
7. Menkiti op. cit. p. 180
8. Oyeshile, “*The Individual-Community Relationship as an Issue in Social and Political Philosophy*”, in Olusegun Oladipo (ed), *Core Issues in African Philosophy* (Ibadan: Hope Publications, 2006) p. 114-115
9. Matolino. B, “The (Mal) Function of “it” in Ifeanyi Menkiti’s Normative Account of Person” in *African Studies Quarterly*, Volume 12, Issue 4, Fall 2011 p. 28
10. (1984:172)

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11. (1984:173)

12. K. Gyekye “Person and community in African thought,” in P.H. Coetzee and A.P.J. Roux (eds.) *The African Philosophy Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Oxford UP, 2003), p. 354

13. (1984:176)

14. K. Gyekye, p. 356

13. *ibid*; p. 357

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## CHAPTER FOUR

### Evaluation and Conclusion

#### 4.1 Evaluation

Menkiti has been criticized for his extreme communitarianism.

According to Kwame Gyekye:

Besides being a communitarian by nature, the human person is, also by nature, other things as well. By other things, I have in mind such essential attributes like rationality, having a capacity for virtue and for evaluating and making moral judgments and, hence, being capable of choice. It is not the community that creates these attributes; it discovers and nurtures them<sup>1</sup>.

Thus, man is not just a bundle of conforming individuals who have nothing to do on his own or who has no identity of his own. Rather, he is also imbued with rationality and freewill and as such is capable of exercising freedom and initiating things even without recourse to the community.

Matolino criticized the concept and usage of “it” in Menkiti’s communitarianism. He argues that such usage derives from a misconception in that the “it” cannot be situated even in an African language such as Menkiti’s Igbo Language. He writes:

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The most curious thing about this supposed normative significance of “it” in African thinking is that the normative significance fails to find expression in any African language including Menkiti’s own Igbo. Interestingly, he is able to find an Igbo proverb that seeks to show that there is an ontological difference between the young and the old. The normative function of “it” would have carried more weight had Menkiti shown that there is such a word in his language which does the normative work for showing the ontological difference between the young and the old. His attempt at using the word “it” from the English language in the way he does as evidence for his conclusion betrays either a selective use of the word or a serious misunderstanding of how the word operates in the English language<sup>2</sup>.

Wiredu’s critics have argued that his positions on personhood are some sort of “tyranny of community”. According to Gyekye;

Individual persons as participants in the shared values and practices, and enmeshed in the web of communal relationships, may find that aspects of those cultural givens are inelegant, undignifying or unenlightening and can thoughtfully be questioned and evaluated. The evaluation may result in individual’s affirming or amending or refining existing communal goals, values and practices; but it may or could also result in the individual’s total rejection of them. The possibility of reevaluation means surely that the person cannot be absorbed by the communal or cultural apparatuses.<sup>3</sup>

The exposition of the life and works of the two personalities together with the themes of communalism in their work will propel us to the discussion of the problem of individualism.

## 4.2 Conclusion

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From the above analysis, one can say without any fear of contradiction that a person is a moral being. a child is not a person because he cannot be morally responsible for his actions.

Menkiti maintains that the community plays a vital role in understanding a person. To this end the notion of a person is communalistic. This communitarian notion of a person should be further research into and analyze.

### **Endnotes**

1. K. Gyekye “Person and community in African thought,” in P.H. Coetzee and A.P.J. Roux (eds.) *The African Philosophy Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Oxford UP, 2003), p. 354
2. Matolino. B, “The (Mal) Function of “it” in Ifeanyi Menkiti’s Normative Account of Person” in *African Studies Quarterly*, Volume 12, Issue 4, Fall 2011 p. 28
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