

THE CONCEPT OF PERSON IN AN AFRICAN CULTURE AND ITS IMPLICATION FOR SOCIAL ORDER

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Abstract

The concept of a person held by a group of people is fundamental in understanding not only how a person within such framework of thought views himself but also how other matters such as the idea of being, morality, knowledge and truth that are essential for the ordering of the society are viewed. This is emphasised by the fact that such a concept encapsulates the role the society expects the individual to play for the attainment of an orderly society. The paper attempts an examination of the descriptive and normative concepts of a person common to many African communities with the aim of determining the role such a theory of person played in the actualization of social order in such communities and what lessons contemporary African societies can learn from such in meeting the challenges of current experiences.

Keywords: African, person, social order, existentialism

Introduction

Every society has at least one collection of ideas that can be called their concept or theory of a person. A concept of a person is a collection of views about what constitute a human being, what makes human beings work, what they need for survival. It will usually put all this together in a way that involves some account of the relations between the events inside human beings that make them act and the bodies that do the acting. Also, a concept of the person is not something that the people in the society will necessarily think of as separate from their views about many other matters. This is because people interact not only with each other but also with a world, both social and natural, around them; and are also widely believed to interact with the sorts of spirits,

gods, and the like that we are inclined to call 'supernatural'. By implication, simply asking someone how they explain the things people do or what people need for survival is not generally guaranteed to produce a well-organized body of prepared doctrine (Appiah, 2004: 25-26). A people's concept of a person gives a more or less comprehensive, epistemological and metaphysical account (cf. Ndubuisi, 2004: 422) of how a person works internally and externally in relation to his biological, social, religious, moral (and other) attitudes towards life. Dear Author.

In this essay, we attempt an exploration of African concept of a person. Put differently, what in African traditional thought is the nature of a person? Who is a person, and what are the make-up or constituent parts, character, conduct and personal idiosyncrasies of the person in an African culture (Ozumba, 2004)? But we must make clear two very essential points here. First is our concept 'African'. Paulin Houtondji smells a rat whenever we talk of African philosophy or thought as if it is a static, immutable, homogenous thought abstracted from history and progress (1983:33). Thus, it will be a mark of intellectual philistinism to continue to hold that all Africans conceive reality woof and weft from exactly the same perspective (as we shall see soon regarding the African concept of a person); the notions are slightly different from one African society to another. What we have are similar outlooks which enjoy a higher semblance than with views outside the African sub-region; like any cultural philosophy, it has certain underlying logic and understanding (Ozumba, 2004). Second, an appraisal or exploration of an African culture consciously or unconsciously involves a comparative analysis of indigenous conceptions vis-à-vis their supposed equivalent in other cultures. This way we shall not only be able to isolate the differences between African thought forms and foreign ones, we shall also be in position to assess these differences in an objective manner. A thorough appraisal of our traditional conceptions vis-à-vis conceptions in other cultures, thus offers an opportunity for intellectual enrichment in Africa. For apart from making it possible for Africans to have a better understanding of their traditional beliefs, it can also provide a reliable basis for taking up and assimilating both what is good in African traditional philosophical ideas and the philosophical ideas of other peoples (Oladipo, 1996: 39-40). It should therefore not be surprising if, in the process of writing this essay we engage into such comparative analysis.

Having these two points in mind, we set out in this essay by an attempt to locate the person in an African ontology or metaphysics. This is followed by the different African concept

of a person, the descriptive and normative. Consequently, we examine some African existential thought about the person. All of this is followed with the implications for the social order especially in the face of unfolding African experiences in contemporary times.

Locating the Person in an African Ontology

A people's metaphysical account, strictly ontological account of reality (*metaphysica generalis*) is a comprehensive account of their experience of the world, of the universe informed by a theory of being or a principle of reality. A people's metaphysics is a position adopted and the reduction of all reality, all experiences to that position. The metaphysical position is more of an editor of reality because it determines the principles or categories of reality that governs their world that grounds their experiences, that explains the universe (see Unah, 2004: 10).

African metaphysics or ontology should, therefore, be seen as the African way of perceiving, interpreting and making meaning out of interactions among beings and reality in general. It is the totality of the African's perception of reality. African metaphysics will therefore include systematization of an African perspective as it relates to being and existence. This will embrace the holistic conception of reality with its appurtenance of relations, qualities, characterization, being and its subtleties, universals, particulars, ideas, mind, culture, logic, moral, theories and presuppositions (Ozumba, 2004).

African ontological account of reality is generally known to be a holistic one because of the manner in which it interlocks both sensible (material) beings and non-sensible (immaterial) beings together as parts of one holistic world having a reciprocal influence on each other. In an African ontology, everything is taken as being; nothing exists that is taken lightly. The belief is that there is reason for whatever is. Though man may not immediately know why a thing is created, they all serve a purpose. Being is therefore conceived as the range of existent things arranged in an African ontology in a hierarchical order. It is generally conceived that God is at the apex followed by the ancestors, then we have the divinities and deities of hereditary relationship followed by other spirits that are manipulated in the sorcery, witchcraft or magic of certain ends. These are represented as charms and amulets; then, we have man and finally, animals and plants as occupying the lowest level (Opoka, 1978: 9-10). Among the Akan people, for instance, the Supreme Being (*Onyame*) occupies the apex of the ontological hierarchy, followed by a multiplicity of deities (*abosum*) and then an array of ancestral spirits (*nsamanfo*).

These are all spiritual beings that are invisible to the ordinary eye. But they are all actively involved in events taking place in the physical plane. Apart from these spiritual entities, we have human beings followed by other natural beings and physical objects occupying the natural world, that is, all the entities that are perceptible empirically (Ekanola, 2006: 76).

Descriptive African Concept of a Person

According to Kwasi Wiredu, there are two approaches to the concept of man in Akan nay African traditional thought. One is descriptive and the other normative (Onah, 2002: 74). The descriptive concept of a person in African traditional thought has to do with the analysis of the constituent parts-physical and non-physical-of the human person as held in an African culture and their functions or significance in the scheme of things. There seem to be no consensual view as to the constituents of the person in an African culture because there tend to be slight difference of views from one African community to another. This will soon be attested to in our examination of some African concepts of a person such as that of the Akan, Yoruba, Ibo, Luo, Ewe, etc; though they can arguably be said to be related.

Kwasi Wiredu, for example, opines a pentachotomistic view of a person in the Akan culture, the descriptive or ontological basis of personhood, its constituents, according to Wiredu are *okra* —the life principle and source of human dignity and destiny, *sunsum* (the personality or charisma principle), and *mogya* (the blood or kinship principle) (Onah: 75). Others are *nipadua* (the physical body) and the *ntoro* [that which is responsible for the cast of personality (the semen)] which is inherited from one's father and is taken as the basis of membership of a patrilineal group. Apparently, the ideas of the *mogya* and *ntoro*, as believed by Wiredu, refer to some kind of rudimentary genetics. However, there is still need to subject these notions to further analysis in order to clarify what they actually stand for (Ekanola: 79-80, Onah: 76).

Kwame Gyekye, on the other hand, opines a somewhat unified dualist view of the Akan concept of a person as simply consisting of the *Okra* (which he interprets as soul) and *nipadua* (body) (Gyekye, 1984: 200-08). Wiredu is however, quick to warn against the translation of *okra* to the English "soul" which is a purely immaterial substance because the *okra* is, to him, a quasi material substance (Onah: 74). This is because the Akan believe that highly developed medicine men with medicinally heightened perception are capable of seeing the *okra*. In addition, there is the belief that specific *okra* has specific kinds of food to which they are allergic and the

consumption of such by an individual may result in physical illness. Kwame Appiah, perhaps, gives a clearer summary of the Akan concept of a person in his tripartite analysis of such in the Asante tradition when he says:

... a person consists of a body (*nipadua*) made from the blood of the mother (the *mogya*); an individual spirit, the *sunsum*, which is the main bearer of one's personality; and a third entity, the *okra*. The *sunsum* derives from the father at conception. The *okra*, a sort of life force that departs from the body only at the person's last breath; is sometimes as with the Greeks and the Hebrews, identified with breath; and is often said to be sent to a person at birth, as the bearer of one's *nkrabea*, or destiny, from Nyame. The *sunsum*, unlike the *okra*, may leave the body during life and does so, for example, in sleep, dreams being thought to be the perceptions of a person's *sunsum* on its nightly peregrinations... (Appiah, 2004:28).

The Yoruba conception of a person, on the other hand, is one that is tripartite. The three elements are *ara* (body), *emi* (vital principle) and *ori* (destiny). The Yoruba believe that it is *ori* that rules, controls, and guides the life and activities of the person. The *ori* as the essence of a person derives from *Olodumare* (Supreme Being). And because this *ori* derives from *Olodumare*, man is bound to *Olodumare*, and without Him, the human being cannot have his being or existence (Oyeshile, 2006a: 157). The *ara* is a collective term for all the material components of a person most important for the Yoruba of which are *Opolo* (the brain), *Okan* (the heart) and *Ifun* (the intestine) (Oladupo, 1992: 15-16):

Both *Opolo* and *Okan* are regarded by the Yoruba as having some connections with human conscious activities— thinking, feeling, etc. *Opolo* is regarded by them as having connections with sanity and intelligence. Thus when a person is insane, they say “*Opolo re ko pe*” (his brain is not complete or not in order)... *Okan*, (physical heart) which, apart from being closely connected with blood, is also regarded as the seat of emotion and psychic energy. A person who is courageous is said to “have a heart” (*oni okan*)... (Ibid: 16).

Ifun, on the other hand, is regarded as the source of strength and resourcefulness. Thus, when a person is described as *ko n' ifun nino* (“He has no intestine”) it means that he is not strong; he has no resilience (See *Ibid*).

Emi is the element that provides the animating force or energy without which a person cannot be said to be living at all, talk less of being conscious. It is, according to Bolaji Idowu, closely associated with the breath and the whole mechanism of breathing which are its most impressive manifestations. Generally speaking, it is regarded by the Yoruba as the basis of human existence. It is the entity which gives life to a person; its presence or absence in a person makes the difference between life and death. It is conceived as that divine element in man which links him directly to God. According to the Yoruba worldview, it is *Olodumare* (the Supreme Being) who breathes it into the bodies formed by *Orisonla* (the primordial divinity) to make them living human beings. Hence, in the event of death, it returns to *Olodumare*, who has among many attributes that of being the owner of life, to give an account of a person's activities on earth and to continue to live. *Emi*, then, for the Yoruba, is immortal (*Ibid*: 19).

According to Olusegun Oladipo, *emi* can be seen to be similar in certain respects to *Okra* of the Akans. They are both, for instance, regarded as the undying part of man which is given directly by the creator before man is born into the world. Also, like the *okra*, *emi* can advice a man on what to do and what not to do. However, they are not identical, for instance, the Akans see the *okra* as the carrier of human destiny; indeed, in the words of Gyekye, "the embodiment and transmitter of the individuals destiny". But the Yoruba see it in another entity, *Ori*, the embodiment of human destiny (*Ibid*: 19). *Ori* (appropriately called inner head) is in the words of Segun Gbadegesin "... the bearer of a person's destiny as well as the determinant of personality" (2004: 53; see also Adeofe, 2004: 69-83). The Ibos of Nigeria, according to G.O. Ozumba, also have a tripartite concept of a person as being constituted of the *aru* (physical body), *chi* (the destiny which can change depending on a number of factors like hardwork, spiritual fortification, etc, and *inmuo* (spirit which is immortal and ensures the individual's continuing self-identity (2004).

So far we have fairly elaborated on the ontological or descriptive concept of a person in the thought systems of different African communities namely the Akan, the Yoruba and the Ibos from which we can gather that a person is made up of a physical body, a vital force and destiny; hence the individual is made up of both material, quasi-material and immaterial parts all forming a unified whole to account for the individual's predispositions and experiences. However, as noted earlier, in an African culture, the concept of a person goes beyond the constituent parts of the person to include a normative conception of a person because it is in the individual's social

relations that he is able to manifest his potentialities that has been embedded in his make-up. In this section, we have only examined the constituent-parts of the person; we now turn to examine the normative concept of a person as found in African traditional thought.

Normative African Concept of a Person

The descriptive African concept of a person examined above reveals the ontological status of the individual while the normative African concept of a person reveals the social status of the individual. Normatively, personhood is not something one is born with. It has to be acquired through internalization of, or at least commitment to the societal values. From this perspective, a person is not just any human being, but one who has attained the status of a responsible member of the society (Onah: 78).

The normative concept of a person evolves from the way in which man is understood in a given community in terms of his relations to other living beings and his role among other men (see Sogolo, 1993: 190-91). In this conception of the person, unlike some Western conception like the conflict, Freudian, polar and Fromun's theory of human nature, the African traditional thought conceive man as a communal being (see Dzobo, 1992: 124-29). Hence J. Mbiti says:

Only in terms of other people does the individual become conscious of his own being, his own duties, his privileges and responsibilities towards himself and towards other people. When he suffers, he does not suffer alone but with the corporate group; when he rejoices, he rejoices not alone but with his kinsmen, his neighbours and relatives whether dead or alive... The individual can only say: "I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am". This is the cardinal point in the understanding of the African view of man (1969: 108-09).

To be a person in this sense, according to Kwasi Wiredu, is to be an adult who works hard, thinks judiciously and is capable to support a conjugal household as well as fulfil a range of obligation to his extended group of kinfolk and to the civic community at large (Onah. 78). A person, in this sense would therefore exclude infants, the insane and social misfits. In an African traditional thought therefore a normal human being has three level of existence; first, as an individual; second, as a member of a group; and third as a member of a community. This is because all of them are constantly interacting and inter-penetrating one another (Ndubuisi: 425). The African society is therefore communal in nature because the person is believed to

continually be in a social relation with others (both living and dead) and cannot exist outside the society. But we must avoid an exaggerated (radical) communalistic theory (Oyeshile, 2006b: 108-14) of a person as advocated by scholars like I. A. Menkiti (Menkiti, 1984: 171ff) and realize that though the African person is communally determined, it is only partly so; for he has his own individualistic values not so determined. 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 judgements and, hence, being capable of choice. It is not the community that creates these attributes; it discovers and nurtures them (inby Oyeshile, 2006b: 114-15).

Expressing this room for individualistic tendencies and potentialities, Benezet Bujo also says succinctly that:

...the individual may not blindly follow the group. Life in community demands alertness and the maintenance of one's own individuality. In other words, the discernment of spirits must be preserved even in the context of friendship and community (2003: 118-19).

This communitarian, normative conception of the person, according to Gyekye, has some implications. It implies:

(i) that the human person does not voluntarily choose to enter into human community, that is, the community life is not optional for any individual person; (ii) that the human person is at once a cultural being; (iii) that the human person cannot --perhaps, must not-- live in isolation from other persons; (iv) that the human persons is naturally oriented towards other persons and must have relationship with them; (v) that social relationships are not contingent but necessary; and (vi) that, following from (iv) and (v), the person is constituted, but only partly..., by social relationships in which he necessarily finds himself (1992: 104).

African societies, therefore, place a great deal of emphasis on communal values. The communal structures of African societies have created a sense of community that characterizes social relations among individual members of the society. The sense of community is an enduring feature of the African social life. African communal system does not, however, exclude

individualistic values. Communal values are those values that appreciate the importance of the community, those values that underpin and guide the type of social relation, attitudes and behaviour that ought to exist between individuals who live together in a community, sharing a social life and having a sense of common good. Examples of such communal values are sharing, mutual aid, caring for others, interdependence, solidarity, reciprocal obligation and social harmony (Gyekye, 1996: 35).

The internalization of these communal values into the individual, in the African worldviews, helps in making the individual the person he is, in the normative, social sense, and in turn ensures for social order or control in the community. This becomes more essential in our realization of the fact that “the individual human person lacks self-sufficiency ... clear from the fact that our capacities and talents, as human beings are plainly limited and not adequate for the realization of basic needs (*Ibid: 37*).”

The qualities associated with the African person in the normative sense thus, are the right use of reason, relative success in family life and successful adjustment of individual interest to those of the community. Therefore, normatively speaking, one cannot be a person without a community. This also implies that personhood can be more or less, not the same at all times; it can be acquired and lost in time. One who acts irresponsibly would be a non-person logically. In the Esan community among the Edo people of Nigeria, for instance, the following expression is often used to refer to someone who is misbehaving (especially habitually).

Ū Iūe mi biē bhe.
(You act like a goat.)

Ūū Iūe mi biō ria.
(You don't act like a person.)

This simply means the fellow at the time of his misbehaving is not acting the way human beings do in the society, the socially accepted way and, hence, in terms of constituent-parts of a person, is a non-person normatively. This means that, normatively, a human being can be a person or non-person (p v ~p) unlimited times all through his life; and also that only some human beings are persons at any given point in time (Onah: 79).

Despite the distinction between the descriptive and the normative concept of person, there is no separation of one from the other in an African culture. It is usually the context that determines which of the concept comes more to the fore. It may be said that the link between the

ontological (descriptive) and social (normative) concept of a person in an African culture, can be seen in the concepts of freedom and responsibility. While considering the descriptive basis of the African person, we saw that he is given life and destiny by the Supreme Being. But the destiny is only in its broadest sense. To the individual is left the freedom to work out the details of his destiny within the context of a closely-knit community that provides the necessary help for such a task. In this light, the individual is held responsible for his actions, though not for the ultimate direction his life may take. Whereas God assigns destinies to individuals, the community only offers guidelines for personal realizations. What the person receives from God is an ontological given; what he receives from the community are possibilities, which he is free to accept or reject. Through a proper development of his mind, an individual becomes amenable to rational persuasion and moral correction within the community. And to the extent that he remains so, he is free, responsible and a person in the social sense (*Ibid*).

In short, there is no end to the process of becoming a person in the Black African community. Not even entrance into the community of the deceased ancestors bestows a completed personal existence, for they too remain always dependent on the community of the living. Each day they must become persons just like those on earth... (Bujo: 117-18).

The African person is therefore always in the process of being and existing and the community provides the place for the continuing evolvement of the individual's personhood. It therefore pays to ponder a bit more vividly on some existential qualities of the individual that reveals his personhood.

The Person's Existential Qualities in an African Culture

From our discourse of the descriptive and normative concept of the person in an African culture, it is obvious that personhood bestows on the individual issues concerning his existence, issues of meaning and meaninglessness, freedom and responsibility in the face of destiny, communal duties and obligations, issues of his possibilities and creativity, of his being a "being unto death", etc. In an African concept of a person, what chances does the individual has in coping with ills of human existence such as frustration, suffering, poverty, injustice, cruelty, anxiety, death, uncertainty and so on (see Igbafen, 2006: 91)? Does he simply fold his hands and watch these problems unfold with the belief that it was destined that way? Does he, like

Heidegger, see himself as a being consciously working towards his death hence seeming death as the sole thing he can do for himself (see Heidegger, 1967: 289)? What sort of attitudes does he see as meaningful? How does he go about achieving them?

N. Otakpor, in his paper “The World is a Market-Place,” attempts an explanation of how Africans view human existence using the market-place as an analogy. A market-place in many African traditional (even modern) societies is a place which opens at sunrise for buyers and sellers to carry out business transactions and closes at sunset. A typical African market does not therefore run 24-hours a day. In some places, a market is opened everyday for business transactions; however, some other communities open their markets for business once every three or four days. Otakpor opines that *Uwa bu afia* (Igbo translation of “the world is a market place”) is a poignant reminder of the damning conditions of our temporality (1996: 527). He goes further to outline many points of comparison between the world and a market place which to him has deep cultural, metaphysical, religious and social implications. The world is a huge market place where all human beings are buyers, and sellers. Among the goods human beings sell in this huge market is their character. A moral person is believed to have recorded gains in this world and in the hereafter. The gain for the good person is the good life which is not necessarily quantifiable in financial or material terms because a good name is better than riches. The converse is true for an immoral person (*Ibid*).

In contrast however, though we know when a market begins and ends (its time frame), life’s time frame is unknown. What is known about a person life is the chronological times of birth and death. Metaphysically speaking, Otakpor says, the life of an African person has no beginning or end just like the world. The individual’s life only partially ends in death. Also, though individuals can decide when to go to the market and return, which market to go to and program their market activities, he has no such privileges as regards life (*Ibid*).

A semblance however is that just as people go to the market with various wares, so do people come into the world with different wares, in this case their destinies. However, though the wares in the market are usually on display for everyone to see, it is not the same with an individual’s destiny, for even the individual bearing it may not know the contents of it; only strong medicine men could reveal it or see it. Otakpor’s analysis is generally meant to serve as a reminder that the world is not a permanent place of abode just as a market is not. It draws attention to the fact that the only permanent phenomenon is temporality. His analysis is meant to

remind us of the mindless monuments which we erect as a consequence of insensitivity to our otherness (*Ibid*: 530). So, what sorts of possibilities are open to the person in such a design of human existence?

There is an issue we must attempt resolving if we must understand the place of freedom, choice and responsibility for the individual in an African community: the issue of destiny. In the previous sections, we talked briefly on destiny. The question however is: if the person is destined, can he be held responsible for his actions? Segun Gbadegesin in his “An Outline of a Theory of Destiny” explains and criticizes different approach to this question using the Yoruba concept of destiny (*ori*) as a case study. A more suitable answer proceeds on the assumption that a bad destiny may be the result of the individual’s own character subsequent to the imposition of an otherwise good destiny. Thus, a person destined to be a successful surgeon may turn out a failure because of his or her laziness and fraudulent activities and a case like this deserves blame. In other words, destiny only guarantees the potentials, not the actualization of a life prospects. It thus depends on individual efforts, hence the emphasis on *ese* (leg) and *owo* (hand) in the elaboration of the concept of destiny. The leg and hand are a symbol of hard work without which a good destiny cannot come to fruition (Gbadegesin: 59-60). This is however not a final blow to the problem of destiny vis-à-vis responsibility because it has its own problem such as it does not account for a person’s misfortunes that are not traceable to his/her character (see *Ibid*: 60). Hence, it is still a subject for more philosophical discourse and analysis. However, the Yoruba nay African community believes strongly in, and do not shy away from praising and/or blaming people for their actions (*Ibid*). As the Esan people believe that though a person is destined which is reflected in the names they give to their children such as *Ehizogie* (It is destiny that chooses a king), *Ehiaguina* (it is destiny we plea to), *Ehinome* (good destiny), etc, achievements in life still lies greatly on the individual’s hard work and character; hence the proverb.

“*Ī Ie emōn ghēdē*”
 (“I do not want to eat pounded plantain”)

Obō ōria a tae mhan.
 (It is your hand you should tell.)

The human being is thus a bundle of creativity and possibilities realization of which is dependent on the individual’s ability to recognize ‘signs’ regarding his creative principle

(Destiny) giving to him by God. Man's ultimate goal as an individual and as a member of his community is to create, multiply and increase because he is the repository of the creative power, the right use of which is his chief responsibility. For instance, when an African woman marries, the most important thing that she takes to her husband's house is her productive powers because this is the essential part of her nature (see *Ibid*, p. 130f). This explains the high regards placed over child bearing (see Igbafen, p. 94f). We must note however that child bearing is not the only creative process in the African person but the creative process embraces the whole of man's life and his relationships.

That the individual is so much of a communal being (a being with others) is an obvious fact that is given serious consideration in any African community such that the individual is not simply expected to develop a creative personality but also to maintain creative relationships with others. The person is a communal being. This fact has already been elaborated on in our discourse of the normative concept of the African person.

In an African culture, the person is also seen as a being unto death. This is however not in the same sense Western existentialists have viewed death as the end of life. As Dzobo says, contrary to the popular (Western) view that the end of life is death, the Africans believe that the end of death is life (p. 134) because man has a continuing existence. This is evidenced in the belief in reincarnation, spirits, and the ancestral cult, which varies in degrees from one African community to another. The expectation of death and the anticipation to join the ancestors has in most cases a this-worldly effect. According to Wiredu, becoming an ancestor, only help the living to realize human purposes (1992: 143). Besides, wanting to be a member of the ancestral cult hereafter will only instigate the individual to live a good life especially in his relationships with others in the community. In summary, death in an African culture does not mean the end of life but a transition to another. This is why it is a thing of joy if an elderly man, who in the eyes of the community is accomplished, dies; but a thing of sorrow when a young man, not yet accomplished, dies. This is because it is believed that the elderly one can peacefully join the ancestral cult but that the young one may have to be reincarnated to live a more fulfilled life or may end up as a roaming spirit.

M. L. Igbafen says therefore about the Owan people of South-western Nigeria that:

...death is both a normal feature of a genuine existential living as well as a tragedy. Death becomes a welcomed phenomenon when a man is of age and has significantly fulfilled all the expectations of societal socio-cultural values... However, Death in Owan cultural framework assumes a tragedy and absurdity that renders existence meaningless when a young man who is perceived “unqualified” for ancestral home dies... (95).

So far, we have examined some attitudes to human existence in an African culture which reveals that the person is an embodiment of creativity and possibility the utilization of which determines largely whether his life will be meaningful or meaningless. In the forth-coming section, our aim will be to determine how the conception of a person in an African traditional thought affects the social order of the African societies. Put differently, what implication does an African concept of a person have for social order?

African Concept of a Person and its Implication for Social Order: Current African Experiences

As noted in the introductory section of this paper, the concept ‘African’ is used in a rather Afrocentric sense to denote the semblances and centrality of issues, outlooks, ideals, and values among different African communities. As Molefi Kete Asante explains, it is the goal of any Afrocentric enterprise to seek to uncover and use codes, paradigms, symbols, motifs, myths, and circles of discussions that reinforce the centrality of African ideals and values as a valid frame of reference for acquiring and examining data (1990: 6). “The Afrocentric enterprise is framed by cosmological, epistemological, axiological and aesthetic issues. In this regard, the Afrocentric method pursues a world voice distinctly African-centred in relationship to external phenomena. How do we gather meaning out of African or other existence” (*Ibid*). The importance of gathering issues, ideals and values central to African communities is that it prevents a psychological dislocation of the African which can create

automatons who are unable to fully capture the historical moment because they are living in someone else’s terms. We can live in our own terms or the terms of others. Where will the African person find emotional and cultural satisfaction if not in her own terms? By ‘terms’ I mean position, place or space (*Ibid*: 8).

Bearing this in mind, we have thus examined the different concept of a person and his existential capacities as it present itself in an African culture. In the descriptive concept we realize that all constituent–parts of the person function together for self-actualization. In the normative concept we also realize that, the individual is intrinsically linked with others and social structures in the community for the attainment of personhood and maintenance of social order, a social order created by the community to aid the individual in attaining his personhood, his goals and aspirations.

The implication the ontological and social assumptions or constructs about the person had for social order in traditional African societies was the internalization into the individuals the norms that ensured a social relation that was communal in nature such that there was accommodation of both individual and communal values which ensured a peaceful and orderly society. The community was a platform structured in such a way that could help for the attainment of both individual and community destinies, and the attainment of personhood. This was made possible by the fulfilment of obligations both on the part of the individual and the community. It is for this reason that African leaders like Nkrumah and Senghor sought for socialism that would reflect the communitarian African social order in traditional setting but the pursuit was too excessive and radical because it was a socialism (communalism) that did not want to recognize individual rights as in genuine African traditional communities; hence, it didn't work (See Gyekye, 1992: 103-04).

Present experiences in African nations have shown that we are far from attaining social order or control. Part of the reasons often given for this is the devastating effect of Western colonization and missionary proselytization on Africa evident in the removal of a genuine capacity for free action from Africans which has made them become passive, unable to contribute creatively to the unfolding of history. To a considerable extent, Africans have lost their capacity for creativity. Instead of assuming the active role of self-creators and makers of culture, they have adopted the passive role of acquiescence before alleged immutable cosmic laws imposed on them by foreign religion and education (Dzobo, 1992: 131-32). Africans have lost their sense of community which is evident in the role played by their leaders in the wrecking of the continent, leaders who are puppets in the hands of Western imperialism. What has been the result of this: poverty (material and mental), disease, famine, squalor, wars, ethnic conflicts

of different sizes and durations, border clashes, refugee problem, overt and covert foreign manipulations, coups and counter-coups..., and so on (Okolo, C.B. quoted by Igbafen, 93-94).

The point being made here is that traditional African societies were preoccupied mainly with the provision of a well structured and organized society as a necessary, not a contingent, factor for the survival of the individual. The structures and the institutions present in such societies were meant to promote and internalize ideals and values that will establish and sustain a social order where the person can attain fulfilment and creativity; such ideals and norms were hinged on intersubjectivity among beings as an essential tool for social living. Having been furnished with a conducive atmosphere for survival and fulfilment, the individual then develops a strong impulse to perform his duties and responsibilities to the community by becoming an active and creative member of the community.

This strong creative impulse seems to be stagnant and inactive in contemporary African societies. The reason being that these nations preoccupy themselves with secondary issues such as the duration of tenure for political office holders, rotational presidency, ethnic and religious identities, possibility of same-sex marriage, prostitution and so on. They however ignore the really essential issues concerning the foundations of social order in the society, the value system appropriate in a developing neo-colonial society, social justice, wealth creation and distribution, social efficiency with moral sensibility, concern for the common good, unity in diversity and so on. Little wonder then that many African nations today are as divided and underdeveloped as any disorderly society could be (Oladipo, 2008: 78-79). Thus, when a society ignores the foundations of a social and orderly life and lack a well construed and coherent idea or conception of who a person is thereby ignoring the fulfilment and creativity of the person within such a society, the result is disorderliness and chaos as is experienced in many parts of the African continent.

What Africa needs, for the attainment of social order, is to primarily focus on means of attaining social order which essentially involves a careful scrutiny and understanding of the ontological and social construction of traditional African thought of a person or personhood in order to be able to construct rules and norms that are patterned along such metaphysical constructs. This is because it is only in this manner that the African person can be carried along to play an active, creative and communal role in a society which he believes he is part of, not in current ontological framework that seems strange to him due to the loss of so much of his values and belief systems. The point here, we must note, is not that Africans should not be open to

foreign views or values but that the core of the African culture such as the conception of a person should be preserved and developed within the same framework, not abandoned. If African leaders however insist on abandoning them, we will therefore be far from attaining social order in African sub-regions.

Conclusion

What can we learn from the African concept of a person? It is neither simply descriptive (ontological) nor normative (social) but a combination of both. Also, the person is always in the process of being a person, hence, not a fully complete person at anytime; that the metaphysical and social construct of a person is responsible for the kind of social (communal) structures put in place for the attainment of both personal and community goals made possible by individual creativity evident in the creative principle of the person (destiny) given him by God. The concept of a person in an African culture therefore had implications for social order because it results in the internalization into the people the values and norms that will help in promoting individual and public good and creativity thereby ensuring a peaceful and orderly atmosphere for co-existence and social thriving.

Being that “the self” or personhood is revealed through the cognitive and moral actions that persons perform and through the emotions that they express (Masolo, 2004: 104) the present African communities and/or nations need to ponder carefully to know if they have the right, concrete concept of personhood or a borrowed concept; for such reflections are very essential at this time to equip us with the proper norms and values to internalize which is very essential for the attainment of social order that is lacking in contemporary Africa.

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