



Names as Persons: A Reflection on the Normative Character of Naming in the Debate of Personhood in African Philosophy

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Abstract. This paper examines the question of personhood in African philosophy. It evaluates the debate between Menkiti-Gyekye which latter gave birth to two distinguish but related schools of thought in African philosophy of personhood. The work argues that the cleavage between the two schools of thought is an artificial one contrary to the watertight distinction found in the ideas of some scholars say (Molefe 2019, Ikuenobe, 2006; Gyekye, 1992; Matolino; 2014). Furthermore, this work avers that the neglect of the normative and metaphysical character of naming in the debate of African philosophy of personhood attest to the inability of thinkers to resolve the problem. Hence, a careful analysis of the notion of names and naming in African philosophy will dissolve the problem of personhood in African philosophy

Keywords: African philosophy, Personhood, Names, normative, metaphysical, communitarianism, individualism

1. Introduction

The idea of person is ambiguous (Wiredu, 1992; Ikuenobe, 2006) to circumvent or eschew this ambiguity lets attempt to explicate the meaning of who a person is. "Who is a person?" is a question imposed on humanity by non-humans just as the question "Are you a person?" is very derogatory. The correct question is "what makes one a person?" and there are basically two schools of thought that purportedly claim to answer to the question of personhood - the first school - the communitarian championed by John Mbiti (1969) and Ifeanyi Menkiti (1984) and the second, the individualism defended by Kwame Gyekye (1992) and Motamai Molefe (2019). These two schools of thought later diverge into two broader and more refined schools with each having different branches and different meaning/conception of a

person. The first school, the communitarian, became known as the metaphysical or descriptive school with branches such as the ontological and personal identity thesis and construe personhood as an essential characteristic of human being, an innate attribute that the agent is born with while the second school of thought now labeled as the normative school of thought emphasized the moral status and social achievement of the agent, making personhood a matter of individual strives, a test one could take and fail.

This work is an attempt to show that this division is an artificial one. That at the end the metaphysical and normative character of personhood cannot be separated if we are to have a robust conception of personhood. In the section that immediately follows, we interpret Menkiti and Gyekye's notion of person and suggest that the auto-critique of communitarianism by Gyekye sets him apart from Menkiti's view of personhood. We further attempt to explain the meaning, import and epistemic vitality of names in an African thought, my objective in this segment is to use certain linguistic patterns or conceptual idioms found in an African thought to argued that names in African thought has metaphysical and normative indices. As a follow up, in the next section, we suggest that names could serve as a bearer of persons. My intention is to articulate a certain idea of name found in an African thought via their linguistic lens to suggest that names which are bearer of persons is both metaphysical and normative and as such the question of rights and autonomy found in Gyekye's conception of personhood and the metaphysical conception of personhood in Menkiti's communitarianism which latter form a cleavage on the personhood debate is an artificial one since an holistic understanding of personhood would involve both the metaphysical and normative characteristics.

1.1 Menkiti and Gyekye Debate: A Mapping

African philosophy of personhood is the discourse of Menkiti and the reactions of Gyekye, Bernard Matolino, Kwame Kaphagawani, Polycarp Ikuenobe, Jimoh Famakinwa and Kwasi Wiredu to Menkiti's thesis. To be sure, there are other scholars whose works qualify to be African philosophy of personhood such as the criticisms of Mpho Tshivhase and the contributions of Molefe and Dismaris Masolo. However, the contours of African view of personhood should be carved along the reactions to the works of Menkiti. If Menkiti stands as the father of the philosophy of personhood in Africa then the reactions of Gyekye should be understood in the context of his critique of Menkiti's claims. This reaction is popularly regarded as the individual-community debate.

The reaction centers on Menkiti's denial of rights in his specification of personhood. It has been argued whether Menkiti's denial of right qualifies him to be labeled as a radical communitarian. While scholars like Gyekye (1992; 1995) thinks that Menkiti is a radical communitarian and wishes to replace it with moderate communitarianism which emphasizes the primacy of rights in the discourse of personhood. Molefe does not share in the view that Menkiti's thesis reduces to radical communitarianism but a part of a total construe of moral-political vision. Some scholars (Matolino, 2009, Famakinwa, 2010) argued for a form of holism. These scholars see the difference as an artificial one since at the end they both ultimately jettison rights.

A people's worldview or ontology is determined by their linguistic dispensation. (Quine 1969) and a major attempt by most African scholars is to sieve African philosophy from the linguistic pattern of the people they studied, this is evident in the opening lines of Menkiti when he informed us that he will rely on the conceptual idioms of a particular African culture in order to delineate their conception of personhood. Here, Menkiti takes for granted the multiplicity and diversity of languages in Africa. Above all, no two words have the same meanings, Quine vehemently argued for this in his IT thesis.

In order to proceed on this ill-fated quest Menkiti sourced for what divides the African from the Westerners instead of searching for what unites us in the light of commensurability. He argued that the Western understanding of man is individualistic and focuses on man's lone characteristics whether physical or psychological but the African defined man with reference to his environing community. And the reality of the communal world takes precedence over the

reality of individual life histories. The communal feeling is well established in a man when he begins to feel at home with not only his biological set but his communal gene pool, his language, his sense of identity.

Furthermore, Menkiti notes that in the African view it is the community which defines a person as person, and not some isolated static quality of rationality, will, or memory. Menkiti's second distinction between African and Western conception of a person is hinged on the processual nature of being in African thought by which he meant persons become persons after a process of incorporation. Personhood in African thought is something that need to be achieved and not something one attained by been born by a fellow human. Thus, Menkiti argued that the western conception of a person is minimal while the African conception is maximal because the Western idea of a person reduces to mere possession of soul, or rationality, or will, or memory but in the case of African thought personhood is something at which the individual could fail, competent, ineffective, better or worse. Hence, for Menkiti the ritual of incorporation and the rules of the community is essential to achieving personhood in African thought.

Menkiti, boldly noted that full personhood is achieved at maturity since he avers that the older one gets the more of a person he/she becomes. This implies that a qualitative difference exists between the old and the young and a sort of ontological progression exists between infancy and ripening old age. Menkiti argues that children or new borns can be regarded as an *it* but this cannot be said of an adult. This *it* designation which marks the beginning of existence also depersonalized one at the end of existence. Menkiti's description of personhood is simply the passage of rituals in African thought. After birth the individual goes through a series of rites of incorporation and initiation before becoming a full person in the eyes of the community. These rites include puberty, procreation, old age, death and entry into the community of departed ancestral spirits. According to Menkiti, this community of departed ancestral spirit is viewed as continuous with the community of the living and these two communities are conceived as being in constant interaction. Importantly, Menkiti noted that the dead still retain their personhood and are addressed by their various names as if they still occupy the center stage as long as they are still remembered by the living. When forgotten by the living, the dead simply slide into personal non-existence and lose all they once possessed by way of personal identity and at this point, they return to the status of an *it*.

Personhood, for Menkiti comes with a sense of morality and rights. Children and dead persons who have slide into personal non-existence cannot be said to be moral or have rights and as such not persons. Animals are also in this class. The duties of an individual to the community take precedence over the rights of the individual in African thought. From the above, we can say that Menkiti is a communitarian in the line of Mbiti and others and his conception of a person is essentially metaphysical.

Gyekye's contribution to the debate is an attempt to proffer a response to the question whether a person, even though he/she lives in a human society, is a self-sufficient atomic individual who does not depend on his/her relationships with others for the realization of his/her ends and who has ontological priority over the community, or whether he/she is by nature a communal (or, communitarian) being, having natural and essential relationships with others (Gyekye, 2002:297)

He argues that Menkiti's metaphysical status of the community vis-a-vis that of the person and his account of personhood in African moral, social, and political philosophy are overstated and not entirely correct, and require some amendments or refinements. (Gyekye, 2002: 298). Gyekye traces this incorrectness to the attempt by Menkiti to ground personhood via communitarian lens on the idea of African socialism espoused by African scholars such as Nkrumah, Senghor, Nyerere and others who, in their anxiety to find anchorage for their ideological choice in the traditional African ideas about society, argued that socialism was foreshadowed in the African traditional idea and practice of communalism. One must note here that socialism has failed in Africa given the current existential realities such as xenophobia in the Southern part of Africa and furthermore there is a conversation as regard whether prefixing socialism with Africa renders it African. Recently scholars have come to disregard socialism for Africapitalism – capitalism in context.

The implications of the communal conception of person are many, Gyekye itemizes some of them, which includes the involuntariness of the person to be a member of a community, cultural beingness of a person, the idea of a we-world, and the compulsoriness of relating with others in the world. Despite these features, Gyekye insist that this type of metaphysical or ontological derivation of a person cannot be upheld because the ontological derivative implied the priority of the individual and brings to question whether the relationships between persons in the community are merely voluntary or contingent? Furthermore, since

the community may constitute the context, social or cultural place, providing the individual person the opportunity to actualize his/her goals can we then say the community is prior to the individual? Thus, the question which Gyekye wishes to investigate is to what extent can we say that the community, given its roles in the formation of a person, is prior to the individual? We must therefore, Gyekye argued understand via logic of relevance that though the community play a role in the realization of the individual person, it does not exhaust every aspect of the person qua person. There are other essential attributes of a person and to disregard these attributes to the glorification of the normative status of the community is to be involved and fall into the temptation of the fallacy of relevance and for him Menkiti is guilty of this temptation. For him, Menkiti errs in attributing to African thought an analysis of *it* characteristic of English grammar. Gyekye argues that in other Akan languages say Ga-Dangne *it* is used for both adults and children and it raises concerns whether those adults are persons? Gyekye further avers that the absence of ritualized grief and elaborate burial ceremony in the event of death of a child does not make the child a non-person and it is misguided to contrast as Menkiti did that between Western and African conception of a person by thinking the former characterize a person to be some sort of isolated static quality and the latter as ground on the ontological progression of some sort. While Gyekye believes the community could set some moral standard to which an individual's action may conform but this does not take care of the complexities of human values, given that they are susceptible to change because of human nature, and that the communal structure which the individual finds himself does not imply that the self is held permanently by that structure (Gyekye, 2002:305) and that the self does not permanently adopt the ethos of communal structure. This is so because Gyekye thinks since the individual has the capacity for self-assertion it must necessarily follows that the individual is an autonomous being – and by this he means that the actions and choices of the individual person emanate from his/her rational will. (Gyekye, 2002:306). Thus, Gyekye considers Menkiti a radical communitarianism whose thought is inspired by the political and moral philosophy of African political leaders of his time.

Gyekye's instructive contribution to the debate is hinged on the notion of rights, duties and human dignity. Gyekye holds that Rawls ethical principles and Kant's categorical imperative reminds us of the communitarian thesis and contents. He wishes to say that the individual person to some extent possessed individual rights and that communal feeling does not

necessarily negate self-interest or self-attention which is a duty the individual persons owns to his/herself. Thus, Gyekye pushes for moderate or restricted version of communitarianism which he believes will give accommodation to communal values as well as to values of individuality, to social commitments as well as to duties of self-attention (Gyekye, 2002: 307)

Dissatisfied with the debate on personhood, Matolino (2014) in his monograph 'Personhood in African philosophy' argued for what he called limited communitarianism – a view which supports the foundational status of rights in the question of personhood. As Molefe noted, Matolino fails to tell us why we should take the issue of rights on the question of personhood in Africa seriously. Perhaps, the recent debate on personhood in African philosophy is centered on the contested character of right. One is then forced to raise questions such as does a baby have rights? This brings to question the moral status of disabled agents, the morons, the mentally unstable and more interestingly whether animals can be accorded some rights since they are sentient beings (Singer, 2009), or should we say morons and goats have no rights and as such non-persons since they can be said to have no dignity.

Commenting on the debate on personhood, Ikuenobe (2016) argues against the claim that the idea of dignity is vague. For him the idea of dignity is a plausible one and should not be taken as Thaddeus Metz (2010 and 2012) wrongly asserted that the mere possession of some ontological properties leads to a harmonious relationship. Ikuenobe insists that dignity is a function of how the agent uses their ontological properties. Molefe is quick to note that the idea of personhood is not the most plausible way to think about morality and politics. I do not agree with Molefe that a perfectionist and normative ideas of personhood will ultimately create a moral political philosophy. The quest for a perfectionist philosophy is utopic and futile.

Thaddeus Metz on his part distinguishes between six interpretations of African ethics and defends a relational interpretation. For Metz a person is a person through other persons. Hence there is need for agent to develop his/her personhood. Jason Van Niekerk (2007) construed his autocentric idea of personhood in line with Metz relational interpretation. Niekerk jettison his idea of autocentric view of personhood with the perfectionist interpretation.

The contributors of a special issue in the volume *Filosofia Theoretica* dedicated to the Menkiti-Gyekye debate wrestled with the weighty issues of determining the place of personal autonomy in the debate

(Chimakonam, 2018); of rethinking African political philosophy in the light of decolonization (Eze, 2018) of the Western tradition inherent in Menkiti-Gyekye debate (Amato, 2018) and finally whether we can justly locate the place of rights in the debate (Eze, 2018, Chimakonam, 2018 and Matolino, 2018). In his reading of Menkiti, Molefe correctly noted that this distinction between the West and the African notion is an externalist and internalist dichotomy since the West conceives person as some property that exist in the individual (such as the reduction of personhood to the possession of rational capacity by Descartes in his slogan "I think therefore I am") in contrast, the African sees personhood as something outside the individual (the syllogism of Mbiti which reduces personhood to social responsibility in the slogan "I am because we are, since we are, therefore I am" for example comes to mind).

As Molefe correctly noted Menkiti's distinction of the Western and African notions of personhood is a metaphysical one or at best it brings to question Menkiti's understanding of the question of personal identity. In all fairness to Menkiti, he does not say that the community is what makes one human or been human in an African sense does not involve rationality, memory and all those psychological properties as Gyekye (1992) observed but the reality of the communal world takes precedence over the reality of individual life histories. Molefe (2019) sees Menkiti's view on personhood as an account of the socialization of the individual and an attempt to explicate a moral/normative theory. This attempt of Menkiti to explicate a normative theory of personhood is expressed in his 2004 work where Menkiti inspired by Tempelsian force theory drew a distinction between a man of middling importance and a powerful man. This idea is inegalitarian and ranks human status in terms of socio-moral significance. For Menkiti there is the idea of perfection or excellence which every man strives to achieve and personhood is determined by the agent's achievement of this moral 'excellence.' If Menkiti is correct, the fully materialized person does not exist since nobody is able to achieve perfection.

At birth, Menkiti argues that the agent was not born with a person status, rather the agent was born with an it-status – a mere human being. Personhood is achieved at maturity. Babies are not persons since they lack ethical maturity or sense of moral excellence. Personhood then is like a test which an agent could take and fail. Some human beings or agents will never be persons since they will never achieve the ethical maturity. As observed by Molefe, though Menkiti used at least three distinct notions of personhood namely (a) personhood as personal identity (b) personhood as

moral perfection and (c) personhood as moral status Menkiti fails to distinguish between the two distinct normative notions of personhood. He also fails to appreciate the difference between the two normative concepts in relation to John Rawl's thoughts on personhood. The idea of equality and justice which Rawls imagined is wrongly interpreted by Menkiti and he hurriedly erected his notion of personhood on it.

As noted above Gyekye (1992) on his part begins the discourse of personhood from Menkiti's analysis. Although he too focused on the normative aspects of personhood, he began by carefully criticizing the metaphysical question inherent in Menkiti's theory. Gyekye charged Menkiti of viewing personhood from a purely radical communitarian perspective. For Gyekye, a person is beyond the communitarian view, since by nature a person is also other things. Hence, Gyekye holds that personhood is a combination of the individual efforts and social facets. And these two conceptions must be treated equally, but imagine when they conflict, Gyekye did not specify which of them should supersede. An agent's ontological property of rationality could make her want to act in certain ways that the community may not necessarily allow. However, his advocacy of moderate communitarianism brings into question the extent to which we can balance the individual and communal facets. As Molefe correctly asserts, Gyekye's attempt to balance the individual facets qua autonomy/rationality grounded in dignity with the communal facets grounded in obligations/duties to promote the common goods ends up as a normative idea of personhood which is patient-centered. In short (Molefe, 2019; Metz, 2013) insists that Gyekye's misfired in his response to Menkiti and conceptually mistook the distinct notions of person in Menkiti's analysis which is normative and may not necessarily involved a concept of rights. Hence, we see scholars like Wiredu's reservation on this issue and his staunch argument that Menkiti is not a radical communitarian. In short Gyekye failed to realize that Menkiti is also in the same camp with him on the question of personhood in Africa since they both ultimately exalted the normative notion of personhood in Africa. If Gyekye classified Menkiti as a radical communitarian how they will he classify Mbiti? Gyekye's critic of radical communitarianism is part of his larger diatribe on African socialist critiques of the notion of rights. African socialism according to Gyekye is a flawed moral-political doctrine.

Another advocate of moderate communitarian worthy of mention here is Matolino (2009, 2014) whose work should be understood in terms of his auto-critique of Kaphagawani's characterization of four conceptions of

personhood in African philosophy. For Kaphagawani there are four basic classifications: The Akan/Yoruba thesis (which conceives personhood as constituting four basic elements, *ara*, *okan*, *emi*, and *ori*), the force theory (as advocated by Tempels), the shadow theory and the communal thesis proposed by John Mbiti. The thesis Kaphagawani adopts is questionable since he did not categorically specify which of the thesis is correct or adequate neither did he identify which one of them is metaphysical, spiritual, or normative. Perhaps, he did not state the notion of personhood he is pursuing (Molefe, 2019). Matolino ultimately rejects this classification not on the ground of clarity or consistency of the personhood under question as Molefe would assume but rather on the ground of reducing the number of classes. Matolino endorses with minor adjustment Ikuenobe's analysis of personhood. Ikuenobe (2016) unlike Kaphagawani (2004) identified two distinct notions of personhood in African philosophy namely: the descriptive (which is physical-metaphysical) and the normative. (which is moral-social) Matolino disagrees with Ikuenobe for identifying descriptive with the metaphysical notion of personhood which for him should have been kept distinct/separate. This should be kept distinct in Molefe's view because while the metaphysical or descriptive school of thought investigates the ontological properties that makes one a person, the normative character of personhood which emphasizes the moral and social status of the agent. Molefe (2019) thinks that Matolino found himself in a conceptual confusion. This confusion is borne out of the project of distinguishing between the metaphysical and normative aspects of personhood in African philosophy. An insurmountable task he imposed upon himself.

Molefe's work contributes to the normative idea of personhood. Molefe wants to develop the moral and political facets of personhood which he claims were underdeveloped and underexplored. Molefe identified four concepts of personhood, two of which are metaphysical and the other two normative. The first metaphysical notion of personhood pertains to its biological/ontological constitute. For Molefe Kwame Gyekye's claim that a person acquires status, habits personality or character traits, falls within this first metaphysical classification of person, since being a person in this regard is prior to any process of socialization and/or character acquisition. This type of distinction will exclude a person from the class of animals. Wiredu, 1996; Kaphagawani, 2004; Oyowe, 2014; Ikuenobe, 2016 correctly observed that this school of thought which seeks to define a person via the ontological and descriptive constitute of an individual.

The second school of metaphysical notion of personhood defines a person via personal identity. The motivation for this school of thought is traceable to the cleavage between the liberals and communitarians in Western philosophical tradition. The question here borders on whether the community plays any role in socialization and development of personal identity, this brings into question the role of social relationships in accounting for personal identity. Menkiti (1984) for example emphasize the role the environing community and plays down the psychological characteristics say memory, rationality etc. Mbiti (1969) equally avers that I am because we are. Molefe noted that Mbiti and Menkiti hope to define personal identity with reference to what is external rather than internal to a person. This is a radical view of communitarianism but a moderate version was propounded by Gyekye (1992).

The two normative schools of thought on the debate of personhood in Africa diverge when it comes to the moral worth of a person. It seeks to question whether morality is ontological/intrinsic or extrinsic. The first school otherwise known as the moral status school argues that moral value should be assigned to entities because they have certain ontological properties. This school of thought holds that the moral status of entity specifies reasons for which the entity should be accorded right, respect, dignity etc. it shows that they should be accorded direct duties of respect and obligation given that they are rational, conscious and sentient beings. (Singer, 2009; Metz 2013)

The second normative school of thought on personhood sees personhood as a result of an agent's act. Here, the moral conduct of the agent is what makes one a person. This is to say, the agent's moral conformity with the community's prescription or norms is what decides personhood. Masolo, 2010, Ikuenobe 2006, Wiredu 2009, Molefe, 2019 agreed that this school of thought dominates the African view of personhood and marks the African difference.

2. The normative vitality of names as persons

The normative character of personhood in African philosophy is a contested one as many scholars have failed to critically underscore the meaning of normativity rather, they chose to base their conception on rights, duties and moral status. Norms are rules and guidelines for behavior within a social group or community. These rules or norms are sometimes conventional and sometimes set by the individual to order his life style. There are sanctions and reward when one does not live according to the rules

governing a community. This explains why there is no clear cut dichotomy between norms and morality. Take for instance, an agent who has a high moral standard (say Menkiti's moral person) will be one who the community does not found wanting in character. The normative character of morality then is hinged on the *oughtness* of the act. Here the community plays a vital role in appreciating the moral conduct of an agent.

The discourse on personhood is incomplete without an understanding of the meaning and vitality of naming in African philosophy. At first what is a name? A name is a pointer of individual destiny. (Asia, 2016) the meaning of a name can only be understood within the language or linguistic framework and/or semantic content in which it is given. Names are identical to the descriptions associated with it by speakers. Names can identify a class, categories of things, (say, family name) or a single thing (individual name). Tyler (1973) proposed a proper name theory in which names have meaning that corresponds to the description of the individual entities to whom the name is applied. Kripke proposed a causal theory of names that in order to use a name successfully to refer to something, you do not have to refer to something, you do not have to be acquainted with a uniquely identifying description of that thing. We also have the unique name theories which argued that names are unique assumptions referring to different entities in the world. Names are metaphysical in Africa discourse. It carries the destiny and future of the bearer. A name and the metaphysical whole of an agent (the bearer) cannot be separated. One is expected to leave out the meaning of his/her name. Hence, names are mostly given in line of the circumstances surrounding the birth of the child. For instance, the Edo name *Onaiwu* is mostly given by parents who has lost their children before, in other to state that this new child will not die, the child is named *Onaiwu*.

Names in African thought as exemplified by the Edo people is a purely human characteristic and it is particularistic. In modern logic, a name signifies a thing. What is a thing? The question of naming featured prominently in medieval philosophy. In the debate of the ontological status of universals, the nominalists upheld that universals are mere names (Stumpf). Although, there is on the one hand treeness from which the idea of this particular tree or that tree arises from. It is a name that signifies a thing, it shows its individuality. In the universe, there are many trees, let us say a community of trees, a name can be used to single out this tree or that tree say a mango tree or apple tree for example. This quest for the uniqueness of being, for individuation in the plethora of the many, is evident also in existentialism because in

existentialism the individual tries to free himself from the ever-consuming fire of the crowd. The existentialists were chasing shadows because they fail to keep an eye on the signifier *names* which singles the individual out of the many. The question of freedom, choice, autonomy and authenticity cannot be discussed without reference to the individual and any discussion on the individual must take into cognizance of their unique features. It follows therefore that a name which is the most common unique feature of an individual cannot be left out in the scheme of things. In Edo thought things have names and the name of a thing shows whether the thing is animate or inanimate and whether it's a human being, animal or some sort of inanimate object. Names of a person, sometimes derivative of their religiosity, cannot be given to animals or objects. It is that name which embodies the epistemic house of that individual without which nothing can be known or said about his/her individuality. This would imply that any reference to the individual will only be meaningful if the name of the individual is mentioned.

Another, epistemic vitality of names in African thought can be seen in the idea of *ehi*. In Edo thought, the individual is not just some sort of object say stone without a future or destiny. The prayer of a right-thinking Edo man is not only to possess the earth, but to also successfully enter the college of *enikaro*. The ancestral cult that houses the spirits of the successfully departed who have lived well and have been given a befitting burial by the *idinogbe*, these people are said to have fulfilled their destiny. Individuals who fail to fulfill their destinies are said to return back to life, this return is not in their physical body but their vital force. Names such as *ehiosu*, *ehiwenma*, *ehimen* are given to individuals to showcase their quest to fulfill their destiny.

Importantly, names involve a sense of responsibility. To who much is given much is expected. In Edo languages names such *Omodion*, *imose*, *osamagbe* etc are given to children to mark what they represent. Immortality is also hinged on the metaphysical nature of name. The question of immortality in philosophy cannot be overemphasized. De Unamuno explores the idea of immortality and comes to the conclusion that.... However, like other thinkers before him he fails to the imports of name in the notion of immortality. Immortality implies surviving after death, that at death there are some elements which survives, whether soul, spirits or others. One of such elements that survive beyond the acts of the individual (say one with great works of arts) is the name. The name reminds of the individual. By implication we cannot speak of a person without mentioning the name of the person. In Edo language, there is a saying that “aiwen

mahowan” you cannot say you don't know the person when ask ‘do you know me?’ because it is disrespectful to say so especially to an older person. Thus, the epistemic foundation for this knowing is the name. The knowledge we have of a person therefore begins with the name of the person. Names are so epistemically relevant that it survives the person at death. When a person dies, the name does not die with him. The person is remembered for his good name hence names are windows of immortalizing a person. From the above, it can be argued that names in African thought have metaphysical and normative indices.

How then does a name makes an agent a person?

3. Names as persons

According to Joao de Pina-Cabral Personhood is the mold within which humans enter humanity – that is, it is the central pathway to reflexive thinking and, therefore, to human sociality. Naming systems reflects this fact. (Pina-Cabral, 2015). Until a child is given a name, the child is not regarded as a person, rather the child is considered merely as a baby. This period of babyhood normally last seven days and if the passage of naming is currently done, the child acquires a name which now identifies the child as a person. Anyone without a name is not a person. Names are given to persons – the type of names given to a person is different from the names given to animals say dogs or other pets. Hence, names are unique to an individual within a family setting and they are pointers of destiny – a unique destiny. No two people in the same family have the same name – it shows individuality as against the communal feeling of some thinkers. To be sure, tribal marks are unspoken names rendered in symbols. It identities a family, tribe, culture and, individual. In tribal marks the identity and personness of a person is encoded in symbolic graphic only to be decoded by those who have can read the signs.

Colwyn Trevarthen (1998) argued that persons are called into personhood by other persons with whom they are in close contact. For him, our names carry within them specific, localized histories of personhood and belonging, both collective and singular. This is true, but Tervarten fails to understand that it is name that a person can only call an agent into personhood via name. it is through names for example that Tempels force theory can be fully understood and appreciated. A “dibia” for example does not kill a person by assaulting him physically, he calls the name and the person appears. Names therefore are powerful instrument that a person cannot ignored when called.

Naming is an existential birthing process. It is the light of these existential features of human beings that the arguments of Ada Agada (2025) were cast in his recent work titled “The Human Being as a Melancholy Being” where he characterizes human being as *homo melancholicus*. This characterization is limited since all melancholies are always sad or depressed people. The African is one who is always happy, he finds his fulfillment in the harmonious unity of nature. Sadness may set-in but when it passes, he finds himself happy again. Adaga’s view is to be understood within the method of consolationism which he advocates and he wishes to address key issues as (a) is human life futile? (b) Is the universe pointless? He fails to see that the human being is not homeless in Africa given the communal feeling inherent in the African mind. While he thinks that death may serve as a home for the African since he is a melancholy being, he upholds the view that human life is ultimately futile. This view does not represent the African view of life because for the African life is sacred, celebrated and meaningful. Personhood is a cult of humanity whereby everyone exists and finds his/her purpose. In this type of co-existence, names are what identifies each agent and gives them purpose. Aldiouma Kodo, Balla Dianka and Moulaye Kone correctly aver that a name of a person is closely related to its bearer that it stands for his/her identity. Nkechi Onah and Benjamin Gudaku noted that personhood is determined by naming. However, the agent’s personality is fully determined by how he/she uses the name. In other not to distort one’s person, it is expected of an agent to live a moral life determine by the community. Person is determined by his name – destiny – good name and bad name People do not give bad names such as Anini as a result of the life lived by the bearers of such names in the past.

There are two types of names, the one given to a new born baby and the one acquired as a result of one’s activity here on earth. The name acquired via the passage of naming informs a sense of equality among persons since everyone is entitled to it, however the name acquired via morality inspires a new sense of inequality which exist in Africa. Menkiti rightly noted that personhood is matter of ranking since the community determines whether one is person or not, it invariably follows that the community determines the inequality that exists among persons. This idea, agent is more person than others, is not a new one since the practice of titleship (Chieftaincy, caste system) has always existed in Africa then it is logical to argue that the fundamental bases or requirement for these titles in Platonic terms is the person(ness) of the person. The agent moral perfection and social class in the community. Hence, the idea of egalitarianism which

permeates the works of most African socialist thinkers say (Nkrumah, 1964; Nyerere, nd) is ill-founded.

A good name is better than silver or gold – hence the endless quest to have a good name in Africa. This name it has been argued remained after death and it is what a person is remembered for. Children who die before they are given names are forgotten and not remembered in the community. The naming ceremony rite is a passage from non-person – to personhood as soon as one gets a name, he is a person otherwise he is a non-person. Names are like tribal marks – it could serve the role of identity whenever the need arise say during the civil war in Nigeria, a person’s name already shows the side of the war the person belongs. The neglect of the vitality of names in the question of identity therefore is an omission taken too far.

A person in an African thought is metaphysical and hence communitarian, the agent is born a person and its personalism cannot be separated from his being... it is an ontological property which cannot be separated from the person. Menkiti was correct here when he argued from a metaphysical dimension and moreover, persons are born into this or that community and as we are told by the social scientists, the enviroing community contributes to the socialization of agent since through the community, the agent comes to dissent or assent from a belief, creates notions of good and bad, right and wrong etc.

Determinism is a school of thought in metaphysics which holds that freedom is elusive or that there are factors beyond an agent’s control which influences the agent’s decision whether moral or otherwise. Menkiti’s idea of person informs a sense of determinism leaving man at the mercy of his community. This radical determinism found in the thought of Menkiti is absence and alien in African thought reason being that there is a sense of morality in Africa. The idea of blame worthiness or praise worthiness of an act implies that the agent has the will to have acted otherwise

In the motion picture *Bourne Identity* the first point was to give him a name. Names are only for the living; dead people are called deceased or at best “the body” or the “the remains of.” Names are not given to dead people. A baby that is born dead cannot be given a name because he is not a person. Names are spiritual entity. They connect the life dot of a person. Naming is a spiritual exercise that involves both a child, the destiny and the parents. The concept of *ehi* in Edo ontology for example, shows that the child has decided its destiny even before birth, hence the parent must spiritually key into this destiny by giving a name

suitable for the child. Names are inspirational they are not given as a result of likeness in pronunciation rather they are given as a mark of the child's destiny. More often than not the story of how the baby is birthed or the circumstances leading to the baby's birth is considered when naming the child.

Names are symbolic. During naming ceremony kola nut which symbolizes life and wealth is broken to pray for the child. Also sugar/honey and oil are placed on the baby's tongue to symbolize sweetness and happy life. Prayers are said about the destiny of the child. The different names given to the child by the invited guests do not stand because there is no spiritual connection with the destiny of the child. Before the name the child is not considered as a person rather it is considered in generic terms such as a baby. However, the individuality and personhood is achieved as soon as the child is named. Can one lose his personhood? This brings into question whether an agent can lose its name? There are two senses of acquiring personhood though naming – the names given at birth and the names achieved as a result of one's own hard work. An agent can lose both because first, a name achieved as a result of hard work can be removed when one does something contrary to the dictate of the community. Scholars like Sartre will say one is a coward not because he was created so, he is a coward by his own actions. (Stumpf, 2001) Names gotten at birth through naming is more difficult to lose than name achieved as a result of hard work. This is so because, names gotten from naming can only be lost at death, if one had not lived well such names are tagged along negativity and people refrain from giving it to new born children. Names such as "Anini" which name represent a notorious thief are no longer given to Edo children as a result of the usage of the name by a notorious criminal.

Name reveals a person's individuality. It also carries power, responsibility and blessings... it reflects the value of our parents and the cultures and societies formed around them. Each name still carries so much meaning, not just through its actual linguistic word origin but through its movement in time and all the spirits and beauty it assumes during that journey. Names can also designate social functions of an individual in the society. The name of a person is gender sensitive. It shows the sex of the person. However, there are cases of unisex.

Naming is done until after seven days, this is because the child should have taken the test of living and passed. Personhood achieved through name at birth can be lost at death. However, personhood acquired as a result of one's hard work can be lost anytime as a result of an immoral act or bad act as conceived by the

society. Morality for the African is a conventional agreement. Hence, when one acts contrary to societal ethos, he is considered as non-person. There are some acts which one must refrain from if he so wishes to be called a person.

Personhood is achieved twice in a lifetime. It is acquired first during the naming ceremony as highlighted above and as a result of one's hard work. Hence, it will only be wise to say that one can lose the personhood acquired through hard work but such a person still remains a person as a result of the name given to him/her during naming. However, we can say that the degree of personhood of the person has lost its hard work is reduced. It is no longer at par with the one whose person is both naming and hard work. In fact there are gradation in personhood – it is in this sense we could say that the personhood of a child say five years old is not equal to that of an elder say seventy years old.

Every child in the society strives to achieve personhood through hard work. It is this sense that we could argue that the child of today struggles through life to become the man of tomorrow. However, the child could fail to be a person in the first sense if he fails to live up to the mandatory seven days and in the second sense if he is lazy and does not work hard. Every African child is taught how to work at a very tender age. The male child followed the father to the farm and learns how to farm while the female child learns how to cook in the kitchen with her mother.

4. Conclusion

From the analysis above, it can be inferred that we need to keep an eye on the normative vitality of names if we are to accurately resolve the question of personhood in African philosophical discourse. The neglect of the normative character of names in African philosophy explains the difficulty in circumventing the hurdles of personhood in African philosophy. As Metz (2013) submitted that the Menkiti-Gyekye debate on personhood should be revisited while keeping an eye (in my opinion) on the normative vitality of names in Africa. Metz gave three characteristics of personhood namely (i) personhood qua human nature (ii) personhood qua moral status and (iii) personhood qua moral excellence. I think there is a fourth condition or characteristics which is personhood qua naming.

Is the idea of personhood not sexist, or male-centered or patriarchal. Some scholars think that it reduces women to a secondary status (Oyowe 2013, 2014a; Manzini 2018 and Eze, 2018). Molefe (2016) correctly notes that we can interpret personhood in a

gender-neutral space and I strongly think names could afford us a basis for reflection on personhood because names are gender base.

Tshivhase (2013) argued that the idea of personhood is overly other-regarding. Molefe (2016) correctly noted that “the excessive emphasis on other-regarding features in the discourse of personhood renders it unable to accommodate crucial individualistic features necessary for a robust human life.” For him it neglects autonomy and authenticity which he thinks are important concepts in appreciating the uniqueness of individuals. Molefe (2018) later seeks to go beyond the oft-made submission that the moral idea of personhood is definitive of African moral thought. To achieve this, he explores the idea of partialism and concludes that we should keep an eye on two related sorts of partialism: agent-related and other-centered partialisms.

Modern political thought is based on the principle of egalitarianism. However, the idea of personhood is inegalitarian since one person can be morally perfect than the other and such the political structure or discourse generated or implied by the idea of personhood will fail to capture the modern political thought (Oyowe, 2018).

It is important to state categorically here that there is no watertight distinction between the metaphysical (descriptive, physical or otherwise) and normative (moral-social) in Africa. In short, these ideas dovetail into one another in the final analysis. Hence, the earlier classifications of personhood in Africa say Molefe, Matolino, Ikuenobe, Kaphagawani were involved in a conceptual mistake or confusion. They took their understanding of metaphysics and normativity from their training in Western philosophy and did not do what Wiredu called conceptual decolonization, to understand these terms in their true African lineament. Perhaps, they were inventing a philosophy for the African via erroneous interpretation and reading of western concepts into African philosophy of personhood. Hence, it is a careful analysis of African conceptual idioms manifest in names for example that a full fledge African discourse on personhood should be based.

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