

An Inquiry Into the Concept of the African Personality (Person) as a Social-Self

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It is a fact of history that the African continent had experienced enslavement and colonialism which, unfortunately, led to the uprootedness of the being of the African. Consequently, one of the great tasks which faced the post-independent African was to come to terms with his selfhood, to construct the truth of his world. This largely helped in forming both the personal identity and the narrative identity of the African personality. This paper critically inquires into how this narrative identity that issued forth from the quest for the establishment of his being or selfhood (or individuality) helps in defining the collective identity of the African as a social being or self. One crucial question before this paper is whether the self loses his selfhood as an African in the collectivity or communalism of the African culture (way of life) together with his freedom and autonomy (of the individual), which are the essential and transcendental qualities of man. Through critical analytic and hermeneutic methods, this paper found out that the African metaphysics of reality or worldview almost sacrifices the freedom and autonomy of the self (as an individual) at the altar of the community, which constitutes its greatest pitfall. Thus, it is a considered conclusion of this paper that the concept of African personality (person or identity) as a social-self appears to ignore certain values that are clearly cherished by individuals practically in all cultures.

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Introduction

The point of departure of this topic is Paul Ricoeur's notion of narrative identity and the sketch of "selfhood" as elaborated over the past years. This is found especially in the conclusion drawn at the end of his work, *Time and Narrative* (Vol. 3), and in the series of his Gifford Lectures that he delivered in 1986. These lectures were later reworked upon and published as *Oneself as Another*. Kathleen Blamey observes that a large part of *Time and Narrative* (Vol. 3) is concerned with developing the interconnections observed between history and fiction as modes of narrative (1995, p. 577). Ricoeur discusses their respective aims, their mutual borrowings, and the subsequent internal effects of this cross-fertilization. The result is an offspring "issuing from the union of history and fiction ... the assignment to an individual or to a community a specific identity that we call their narrative identity" (1988, p. 246).

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Thus, the “self” is one that has come to be the focus of many of Ricoeur’s discussions of “subject” or what he himself prefers to call “personal identity”. To my understanding, this is the notion of the “self” as *ipseity* (someone) based on the dynamic structure of narrative identity. It is the notion of “self” based on *oneself as another*, which suggests from the outset that the selfhood of oneself implies otherness to such an intimate degree that one cannot be thought of without the other; that instead one passes into the other as we might say, in Hegelian terms, “as” implying “oneself inasmuch as being other”, and not “oneself similar to another” in comparison (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 3). Hence, Blamey observes that the problematic of “self” has been developed in response to the question: Who? Who says I? (1995, p. 598). Ricoeur, then, says that to answer the question “who?” as Hannah Arendt has so forcefully put it, is to tell the story of a life. The story tells about the action of the “who”. And the identity of this “who”, therefore itself, must be a narrative identity (Ricoeur, 1988, p. 246). Thus, narrative identity is not the inflexible and static identity of things, of the same (*idem*), but is to be understood in the sense of oneself, as self-sameness or self-constancy (*ipse*).

Ricoeur favours the term *ipseity* (the term which he developed through the notion of selfhood) to express this dynamic identity which is not substantial or formal identity, but as a result of a diachronic process of construction. Thus, from Ricoeur’s theory of narrative identity, one can make these two observations:

(a) The nature of narrative identity draws upon the distinction between *ipse* (“selfhood”, “oneself” inasmuch as being “other”) and *idem* (sameness); that is, the person as someone in contrast to the fixed permanence of sameness; and

(b) the notion of narrative identity as “the assignment to an individual or to a community of a specific identity that we can call their narrative identity.” This write-up wishes, then, to trace the African personality (or person) as a social “self” defined from the historical and collective past colonial experiences (narrative identity) of the African continent.

African Personality

In his book, Okolo observes that “the phrase ‘African Personality’ has become rather common in the social and political utterances of many contemporary African leaders and intellectuals” (1979, p. 48). He then traced back the phrase to Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana as its ardent promoter. Before the First Conference of Independent African States held in Accra in April 1958, Nkrumah had emphasized the need for “self-expression” by Africans from their own collective/common experience (or identity) as a people. He said:

For too long in our history, Africa has spoken through the voices of others. Now what I have called the African personality ... will have a chance of making its impact and will let the world know it through the voices of Africa’s own sons. (Quaison-Sackey, 1963, p. 35)

Other African leaders since then have made use of the same concept with somewhat different meanings and interpretations. For example, Quaison-Sackey thinks of the African personality in terms of “cultural expression of what is common to all peoples whose home is on the continent of Africa” (1963, p. 36).

At this juncture, one may ask: What exactly does this rather fluid phrase mean, especially among black Africans today? What is its significance in the context of the socio-political and cultural aspirations of modern Africans? What is the notion of the “self” in African *Weltanschauung* (worldview) or philosophy? These form part and parcel of the objectives of this inquiry, which is designed as a critical reflection on the collective Being of African (lived experiences) as a community.

African Experience Under Colonialism

Ricoeur's notion of narrative identity as "the assignment to an individual or to a community of a specific identity" comes handy here. From this perspective, Okolo rightly observes that "the guide to the meaning of the African personality is in the context of its first proclamation in modern times by Nkrumah" (1979, p. 49). As he also rightly underlines, the spirit of the times in Africa was for a total decolonization of the continent, the liberation of the African person from the political grip of his imperial masters. For the modern African, it was a great awakening from colonial and cultural slumber to the assertion of the truth of his being and the world. In the words of Okolo:

Decolonization of the African continent therefore became the inescapable imperative for these pioneers of African liberation as a task that was rooted in the experiencing of their world as "dominated," "exposed," "partitioned" and consequently as "unrealistic since self-actualization was impossible under the circumstances." (1979, p. 18)

The African experience of colonialism, writes Okolo, "was a tragic one particularly in the assimilation policies of the Portuguese as well as the French colonial lords" (1993, p. 49). In fact, it was seen as a period of total eclipse of the black man and the full worth of his civilization, complete self-alienation as a black African with a distinct culture. In another review of the African experience under colonialism, Okolo observes that

the policy amounted to making French citizens out of black people: "it means the uprootedness of their being and cultural values since they were neither accepted as French people nor as distinct citizens of the black world. The policy simply ignored and even despised the whole values and civilization of a people". (1984, p. 428)

For Albert Memmi,

the most serious blow suffered by the colonized is being removed from history and community. Colonization usurps any free role in either war or peace, every decision contributing to his destiny and that of the world, and all the cultural and social responsibility. (1967, p. 91)

These various opinions make the point that colonialism and its master-servant relationship meant for the African a negation of the self, a marginal role in his own destiny, an object rather than a subject of his own history. And as far as his being or personality was concerned, the African remained in the colonizer's eyes inauthentic, untrue, "an invisible man" or what Franz Fanon describes as "black skins white masks" (Fanon, 1967), since the measure of his true self was "another", namely, the white man and his ideals. As a consequence, one of the great tasks which faced the post-independent African was to come to terms with his ipseity (selfhood) to construct the truth of his world (by assigning to himself or to his community a specific collective identity), to be master and controller of his own destiny, and at the same time, carry on tireless struggles against colonialism, racism, and imperialism in their many faces in parts of Africa. It is in this same line of thought that the following words of Nkrumah can be interpreted: "Ghana's independence is meaningless unless it is linked up with the total liberation of Africa" (1967, p. 4). From the above, one sees that it is in the context of colonial experience and consequent effort of the post-colonial African to construct the truth of his being (his ipseity/selfhood, to use Ricoeur's phrases) and reassert himself as the master of his own destiny that the true meaning of the African personality fully emerges.

Meaning of African Personality

The African saw decolonizing his continent as a true gateway to a new being to "independent

self-consciousness”, to being free, being in a self-controlled continent, as distinct from “colonial personality”, one dominated, enslaved, and merely controlled to act in accordance with the dictates and values of the colonial masters. As used by Nkrumah and other African nationals, says Okolo, African personality is not a theoretical passive concept nor is it an *a priori* analysis of the metaphysical constitution of the African person. Rather, it is essentially cultural, hence dynamic and practical. It is indeed an African cultural mode of being-in-the-world. For personality, Okolo observes further, and concretizes itself through human achievements, initiatives, assumption of responsibility, etc. (1993, p. 51). On either personal or collective level, it realizes and temporizes itself through the various struggles and challenges of its social, cultural, and political environment. Thus, African personality as used by Africans has concrete rather than abstract aims.

For Quaison-Sackey, African personality also establishes itself and proves its worth through action, particularly political power and action. Thus, he says:

The concept of the African personality is extremely active and vital; it is in fact an ideal and like any ideal, it is difficult both to define and to realize. In general, however, it projects a figure of action and thought of unified power which displays itself, and thereby defines itself in action –particularly in political action. (1963, p. 37)

Thus, the African personality (or identity) in action presupposes the state of freedom, independence, responsibility, and control of his world by the African himself. In other words, Okolo observes, it is simply not enough to be an inhabitant of the African continent. The African has to establish his birthright. He has to prove his selfhood. He has to prove himself master of his world through, for instance, freeing himself and his continent from foreign domination, exploitation, and manipulation through building up a healthy, virile, self-reliant economy for the masses and be capable of developing Africa’s vast natural resources primarily for the benefit of African people themselves. These are various dynamics of African personality, of the African person in action, which would fully establish his manhood and birthright in Africa. As Nkrumah conceived it, the notion of African personality is rooted in the ability of Africans to assert their freedom to act both individually and collectively at any given time for their own interests. It is also rooted in the ability of Africans to make their influence felt in time of war and peace and to affirm the right of all people to decide for themselves their own form of Government, and the right of all people to lead their own lives no matter their race, color, and creed freely and devoid of fear.

The Notion of Social Self

We now come to the heart of the matter, which is the articulation of the notion of social self in African worldview or philosophy. We note briefly that the essence of the African metaphysics of reality or cosmic vision is that the universe or nature is not something discrete but a series of interactions and interconnections. To exist means more than just “being there”. For Ruch and Anyanwu, “it means standing in a particular relationship with all there is, both visible and invisible” (1981, p. 14). Okolo observes that the interactions and intercommunications between the visible created order and the invisible world of God, spirits, ancestors are only possible through men, the ontological mean between beings acting above and below him. In this sense, man in the African world-view is the center of creation with intimate and personal relationships above and below him. The point worth expressing here is that the world of spirits, human beings, and other lower organic and inorganic substances form the same totality of existing, inter-acting beings or reality. Consequently, says

Okolo, in the African universe and in accord with people's beliefs, there are repeated interactions, communications and even local permutations between the dead and the living, spirits, and human beings. This sketch of African metaphysics of reality, observe Ruch and Anyanwu, is "an important key to the study of self and its problems" (1981, p. 14). Okolo affirms also that this is the category of understanding of self.

Thus, Placide Tempels gives a description of this mode of understanding of self:

Just as Bantu (Black Africa) ontology is opposed to the European concept of individuated things existing in themselves, isolated from others, so Bantu psychology cannot conceive of man as an individual, as a force existing by itself and apart from its ontological relationship with other living beings and from its connections with animals or inanimate forces around it. (1959, p. 103)

Thus, and as a matter of fact, says Okolo, "individuals only become real in their relationships with others, in a community or a group" (1993, p. 124). It is the community which makes the individual to the extent that without the community, the individuals has not existence. This is the point that is well made by John Mbiti in defining the being of an individual in African culture: "I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am" (1969, p. 108), which is somehow an adaptation of the Cartesian "cogito ergo sum". Tom Mboya also underlines the fact that African self is essentially social, a being-in-community. Hence, he says that "most African tribes have a communal approach to life. A person is an individual only to the extent that he is a member of a clan, a community or a family" (1963, pp. 164-165). Tempels was very insistent on this point when he says:

The Bantu cannot be a lone being. It is not a good enough synonym to say that he is a social being. No: He feels and knows himself to be a vital force, at this very time to be in intimate and personal relationship with other forces acting above him and below him in the hierarchy of forces. (1959, p. 103)

Tempels also explicitly holds that the Bantu man

never appears as an independent entity. Every man, every individual forms a link in the chain of vital forces, a living link, active and passive, joined from above to the descending line of his ancestry and sustaining below him the line of descendants. (1959, p. 108)

Thus, Okolo says that the self in African philosophy as in the naturalistic metaphysics of John Dewey (which admits of only one kind of reality in nature—the seen, the tangible, and the verifiable), for example, is essentially social, man-in-relation-to-others, but with this notable distinction. The distinction is that interconnections and relationships of self to others in African philosophy extend to the spirit-world, to dead ancestors, the "living-dead", whereas the interconnections and relationships in Dewey's metaphysics of self and reality as a whole are wholly within nature, not in another realm of reality.

Of course, as Okolo observes, there is a problem with such a philosophy of self in respect of the status of the self and its autonomy as an individual. That is to say, the African is not just a being but a being-with-others. Thus, the self, or the "I", is defined in terms of the "we-existence" just as much as "we" in "I-existence" through social interaction. As Mbiti succinctly put it, "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am" (1969, p. 108). So there is a problem regarding the status of self as an independent subject. Suffice it here to observe that some scholars affirm that in African philosophy, self is not completely dissolved into an object. For as Dewey observes, "an individual existence has a double status and import" namely:

There is an individual that belongs in a continuous system of connected events ... then there is the individual that finds a gap between its distinctive bias and the operations of the things through which alone its need can be satisfied. It is broken off, discrete because it is at odds with its surroundings. (1958, p. 245)

Thus, the status of self as an individual entity is recognized in African philosophy, a proof that self has somehow a double status, one as a being-in-relation-to-others, the other, as a being unique and unduplicatable. The African shows this uniqueness, identity, and discreteness (of the person or individual) through names they give to individuals. From this perspective, Tempels says that “the name expresses the individual character of being. The name is not a simple external courtesy; it is the very reality of the individual” (1959, p. 106). Okolo supports Tempels’ view when he observes that African names are not just mere labels of distinction, to differentiate, for instance, James from John.

Evaluation

Recall that our point of departure in this write-up is Ricoeur’s notion of narrative identity and the sketch of selfhood as elaborated by him over a few years ago. One associates himself with Edi Pucci’s pertinent observations that, against philosophies which aim at the subject’s destruction, Ricoeur concerns himself with saving and maintaining the truth lying at the core of the *philosophy of reflection*, the term by which he designates “the mode though stemming from the Cartesian Cogito”, continuing through Kant, and comprehending Husserlian phenomenology of which Ricoeur is a major interpreter. But, Pucci says, in the *Time and Narrative* and *Oneself as Another*, Ricoeur re-considers that if we remain within the limits of a philosophy of knowledge and reflection alone, then language and its structures, the consciousness within its complexes and compulsion to repeat, predominates upon the “I”, upon its reflection and its freedom. The “subject” in this situation is always “deconstructed” and “destroyed”. But, if the “philosophy of knowledge” has been surpassed in a philosophy of action, in which we can inquire after the real meaning of the subject, then human subjectivity can be rescued and recuperated (1992, pp. 186-187). Pucci observes that not a pure and simple return to immediacy of reflection upon the subject, Ricoeur’s project concerns itself with something more profound, namely:

The cogito must be led back from the abstract notion of *res cogitans* in which Descartes had confined it and from the pure abstract notion of reflexive judging and representational consciousness in which the idealist philosophies located it, to the who of the being of each of us. “Who are we?” “Who is each of us?” (1992, p. 187)

He says that these “are questions of personal identity which many philosophies of an empiricist or analytic stamp have put to crisis” (1992, p. 187). Furthermore, says Pucci, this is also “the fundamental problematic which Ricoeur develops and which leads into the theme of *narrative identity* in which the human subject historicizes itself and finds itself as ‘the acting and suffering individual’” (1992, p. 187).

Thus, we noted earlier that the guide to the true meaning of African personality (person or identity) is the historical context of its first proclamation in modern times by Nkrumah. It was in the context of decolonization of African continent: a great awakening from colonial and cultural slumber to the assertion of the truth of his being and the world by the African. Here, Pucci observes that in the “Conclusion” of *Time and Narrative* (Vol. 3), Ricoeur “returns with vivacity to his argument, to evidence how narrative and history, with their differences reconfigure the time in which the life of each of us unfolds, as a unique and common time, in which humans encounter each other and act” (1992, p. 191). Thus, Ricoeur writes there, “the fragile offshoot issuing from the union of history and fiction is the assignment to an individual or a community of a specific identity that we can call their narrative identity” (1988, p. 246). This identity (of oneself) is not merely in the sense of substantial numerical sameness, but rather a selfhood (ipseity) as an attestation of being oneself, which is an important and

passionate task of each of us. For, says Pucci, it emphasizes morally autonomous and responsible action such as would satisfy the exigency of the moral autonomy of the individual, and above all, it allows each of us to find ourselves in a community which we appropriate in a consciousness of its tradition and which then enables us to project our future in freedom (1992, p. 191).

With “social” as the main category of understanding self, other problems, such as freedom, arise. Thus, in his perspective analysis of African socialism or the African communal way-of-life (or culture), Chukwuemeka Nze raised the question of individual liberty or freedom. He asks: “If the individual is under the firm grip of a compulsion by his over dependence on and his over identification with the community, does he possess his liberty and freedom?” (1989, p. 20) Nze, however, quickly recognizes and acknowledges personal or individual freedom in African communal life. The individual is free even though his will is determined by his community. As a member of the whole, he enjoys that amount of freedom which derives from the collectivity. In the words of Nze:

Although the individual is swallowed by the society in African communalism, he still enjoys his freedom and autonomy, since relationships and dependencies are reciprocal and indeed circular in movement; their flow is like that in the human circulatory system. (1989, p. 20)

However, Okolo points out that this view of Nze is highly defective, at best, an incomplete truth. This is because, at bottom, the seeming freedom which the individual enjoys is ultimately and in reality a derivative one dependent on and largely determined by the other, that is, the community. Little or no room is left to the individual for initiative, responsibility, auto-decision, auto-determination, etc., which individuals cherish as individuals and which are the hallmarks of true liberty and autonomy. Moreover, man is intrinsic, not extrinsic; a subject, not wholly an object, an end in itself, not solely a means to an end; self-determined, not other-determined, and so on. But the self appears to be dominantly the opposite in African worldview or philosophy. Consequently, the concept of African personality (person or identity) as a social-self ignores such values as personal initiative, responsibility, subjectivity, independence, which values are clearly cherished by individuals practically in all cultures. This is seen as a serious attack at the very root of human freedom and autonomy. It is in this sense that self (or selfhood) as an individual in African philosophy is highly problematic and inadequate in that system.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the experience of the African continent of enslavement and colonialism and the consequent uprootedness of the being (of the African) almost largely helped in forming both the personal identity and the specific identity (narrative identity) of the African personality. He is an African, not an Asian or a European, or an American. He is a being, located in time (and space), a being like any other (being), with full liberty and autonomy in his selfhood as an African. This narrative identity, which issued forth from the quest for the establishment of his being or ipseity (oneself, selfhood, or individuality) helped in defining the collective identity of the African as a being-in-relation-to-others—a social being or self. The self as an individual almost loses itself (his selfhood) in this collectivity, together with such essential and transcendental qualities of man—the human freedom and the autonomy of the individual. This constitutes the greatest pitfall of the African metaphysics of reality or worldview—i.e., the sacrifice of the freedom and the autonomy of the self (as an individual) at the altar of the collectivity or the community.

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