Personhood and Social Power in African Thought

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Abstract

The paper is based on the hypothesis that received meanings of personhood in any social context are almost always associated with notions of power. Drawing on some interesting insights from the quite recent history of African philosophy as a counter-colonial practice as well as from available evidence in social anthropology, the paper specifically investigates the link between social power and a widely received conception of personhood namely, the communitarian/ normative conception of personhood. Two central claims are advanced. First, the paper suggests that the search for and the articulation of a distinctive African conception of personhood are strongly motivated by some non-epistemic motive, which the paper identifies as a struggle for power. Second, the paper argues that the communitarian/normative conception of personhood is deeply contingent upon social power differentials among individuals in community and, relatedly, this feature of socially engendered personhood is sufficient to cast a shadow of doubt on the much vaunted egalitarian nature of the social space in which individuals are believed to acquire personhood.

Keywords: African, Personhood, Communitarianism, Power, Egalitarianism

Introduction

Anthropologist Paul Riesman has noted that 'the creation of meaning in a society – including the meanings of womanhood, manhood, personhood, etc. – may usually or even always involve a power struggle' (1996: 91). In making this observation, it is not entirely clear that Riesman was offering a criticism of the emerging conceptions of personhood, womanhood and

manhood. What is clear is that that observation is borne out by the available anthropological evidence he samples. The evidence unambiguously points very broadly to the deep connections between 'the creation of meaning' and power. My aim is to explore one aspect of this connection – I wish to explore specifically the relationship between a widely received conception of personhood and power. I have in mind the idea that personhood is socially acquired or that it is something that can be had in concert with others. This idea of personhood is the upshot of the communitarian valuation of community as ontologically, morally and epistemological prior to the individual[1].

This conception of personhood has received substantial treatment by African philosophers. But although significant contributions have been made by way of illuminating that idea of personhood, its connection to power remains underexplored. I intend, by means of a careful application of philosophy to anthropology, to make sense of Riesman's observation and thereby attempt to repair this obvious lack.

I pursue two distinct lines of exploration in order to establish the connection between personhood and power. In section II, I suggest that a non-epistemic motivation, which I identify as a struggle for power, underlies the search for and articulation of a distinctive African conception of personhood. I try to achieve this by showing that when examined through the prism of African philosophy as a 'counter-colonial practice', theorizing about a distinctively African (socially engendered) view of personhood betrays a struggle for power. Or, alternatively, a struggle to reaffirm a distinctive African meaning of what it means to be a person against colonial definitions. In section III, I provide details of the relevant conception of personhood and then show that it is contingent upon the social power differentials among individuals along familiar lines of social class, seniority and gender. Throughout this section, I assume that personhood as socially engendered

[1] The thesis is powerfully expressed by Menkiti who asserts that in African thought '… the reality of the communal world takes precedence over the reality of the individual life histories, whatever these may be' (Menkiti 1984: 171). See also, Kenyatta 1965: 180 and Senghor 1964: 49, 93–94. Many other African philosophers subscribe quite generally to the view that community, rather than individual, is the axiomatic principle around which all other facts revolve.

cannot be abstracted independent of the actual social relations that constitute the social space in which individuals evolve into persons.

Beyond these empirical generalizations, I argue in the final section that recognizing the deep connections between power and personhood, especially the fact that the relevant conception of personhood is contingent on unequal power relations, shouldn't leave unaffected our judgment about that conception of personhood. Accordingly, I draw attention to something I find paradoxical in the attempt to define personhood as socially conditioned. More specifically, the view of personhood as contingent upon social power differentials among individuals in community flies in the face of the tacit assumption, by proponents of the relevant conception of personhood, of an egalitarian social context in which individuals acquire personhood. In the end, I suggest that equality is a basic moral ideal that cannot plausibly be grounded on empirical facts regarding the power status of individuals in community—that is to say, on basic facts assumed by proponents of the communitarian/normative conception of personhood.

A Non-Epistemic Basis for Communal Selfhood

Rosalind Shaw (2002: 25) has pointed out that African notions of personhood have often been used as foils for Western notions of personhood. The primary motivation for this is in part couched in the long history of Western denigration of African modes of thought. As a reaction, African intellectuals rallied around the idea of difference in giving content to the theories and philosophies that emerge in the period ushering in independence and beyond. One subject matter in which this assertion of difference is especially noticeable is in the theorization of selfhood[2].

One widely received conception of personhood is the communitarian/ normative conception. It has often been used as a foil against Western notions of personhood. Descartes' attempt to locate personhood in some static quality, namely the capacity for thought, has frequently been chosen as representative of Western conception of personhood. What's important, though, isn't so much the content of Descartes' conception of personhood as such but the methodological approach within which it figures. That approach to the question of personhood follows an easily recognizable pattern. This

[2] Throughout, I use the terms 'selfhood' and 'personhood' interchangeably.

involves the identification of some isolated quality of which the human being is in possession. This quality is taken to be definitive of what it means to be a person, such that an entity lacking said characteristic is by virtue of that lack excluded from the community of persons. Take, for instance, Frankfurt's (1971) view of person as an entity with the capacity for second-order volition or the capacity to form effective second-order desires. An entity lacking this specific capacity is not a person, in Frankfurt's view, since it lacks the essential feature that matters for personhood. Many African thinkers believe that this methodological approach to accounting for personhood stands in sharp contrast to the African one, which, they insist is sensitive not to intrinsic facts about personal constitution but to other facts.

In this connection, Placide Tempels' project, which aimed at articulating a distinctive theory of personhood on behalf of the *Baluba*, marks the beginning of a major shift away from the Western approach to personhood. The motivation for the project has been called into question by several philosophers; in particular, some take it to be fundamentally aligned to the colonialist agenda[3]. Beyond these concerns, however, Tempels' *Bantu* philosophy remains historically relevant, being crucial to the emergence of contemporary African philosophy, and the content of the philosophy he articulates has provoked several exciting philosophical debates. At the end of this section, I shall briefly discuss some of the very lively protestations against Tempels' Bantu philosophy, which, along with other similar philosophical approaches, has been condescendingly branded ethnophilosophy by the Beninois philosopher, Paulin Hountondji. In the meantime, it is worth noting that Tempels interpreted the *Baluba* as holding the belief that personhood depends on the possession of vital force and that the measure of one's vital force ultimately depends on the quality of relationships one has with others. On this approach, then, personhood isn't merely the result of possessing some specific quality, as is the case in Western philosophy, particularly the Cartesian variety, but is defined essentially in reference to others.

Notice, then, the substantial modification to the Western approach. The value of personhood no longer depends on the mere possession of some characteristic internal to the constitution of the individual; the basis of

[3] See, for instance, Aimé Césaire's political criticism of Ethnophilosophy as an attempt to create a diversion away from the real political issues that confronted Africans.

personhood is ultimately located in something extrinsic viz. the quality of one's relationships with others. Here is Tempels (1959: 58) on the idea that being a person is at bottom a function of the quality of relationships the person maintains with others:

> The concept of separate being … entirely independent of one another, is foreign to Bantu thought. Bantu hold that created beings preserve a bond one with another, an intimate ontological relationship …. For the Bantu there is interaction of being, that is to say, of force with force.

But Tempels is not alone in thinking that the African meaning of personhood differs substantially from Western one or that in contrast to the latter, personhood in African thought is defined in reference to others. Perhaps, the clearest expression of that idea is Mbiti's widely cited play on the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum* (I think therefore I am). Since personhood is not dependent on the mere possession of the capacity for thought but is a function of maintaining vital relationships with others in community, the individual, according to Mbiti, must say 'I am because we are; and since we are therefore I am' (1969: 109). In this way, he locates the individual person, contra Descartes, not in the isolated occurrence of thought, but in dynamic relationships with others thus reinforcing the view that personhood is something that can only be had in concert with others – that is to say, in community.

But Mbiti's rather captivating phrase would be believable if only it were plausible. As far as I am aware, it was the Malawian philosopher Didier Kaphagawani who first stumbled upon the incoherence of Mbiti's claim. Holding it up to its Cartesian counterpart, Kaphagawani ingeniously observed that although the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum* retains a certain pretence to logical validity, since a supporting premiss can be plausibly constructed to establish its conclusion, the same cannot be said of Mbiti's claim. The point is that Mbiti's widely cited claim fails the simple test of validity since there couldn't possibly be a coherent helping premise to establish the conclusion the argument seeks to reach. Here is Kaphagawani,

> [a]lthough the *cogito* argument could have pretensions of validity when provided …. 'Whatever thinks exists as a suppressed premise …. I find it difficult to imagine quite what suppressed premise would

render Mbiti's argument valid (2004: 337 - 338).

It should go without saying that Kaphagawani's criticism of Mbiti's claim is a very powerful one[4]. Yet, my interest is not so much in Mbiti's incoherence as such but rather in the implication of that incoherence on the idea that personhood is ultimately a function of individual dependence on community—something which Mbiti's claim sought to capture. For if Kaphagawani is right, then the least one would expect from proponents of this view of personhood is an attempt to rescue the thesis from the apparent illogicality. Anything short of rescue would imply a total rejection of the thesis. What we notice, however, is a total disregard of the problematic captured in Kaphagawani's criticism. Subsequent defenders of Tempels' and Mbiti's original idea have conveniently sidestepped the problem of establishing the validity of the thesis, preferring instead to expatiate on the logically dubious claim. Perhaps, this is what Masolo had in mind when he pointed out that African philosophers do not 'give an analytical account of their claim that African societies were communitarian in their social-political ethic. Instead, it is merely asserted as an abiding truth …' (2004: 490). Although the claim fails the simplest test of logic (i.e. validity) and in spite of its obvious illogic, it is uncritically embraced and still widely employed. The claim 'I am because we are' is bandied everywhere as a distinctive African contribution to knowledge.

But why is this so in spite of its failure to stand the test of logic? I diagnose this apparent indifference to the logical status of the claim as facilitated by a non-epistemic motivation. I begin from what I deem to be an uncontroversial premise that what has come to be known as African philosophy, at least in its contemporary and written form, is situated within

[4] The point being made here should be readily available to those who already understand the basics of logic. For those who may not fully grasp the point, it is crucial to closely consider Descartes' *cogito ergo sum*, to clearly illustrate the point. The proposition, 'I think therefore I am' is a valid (as opposed to sound) argument when a helping premise is added to it. That helping premise is, 'whatever thinks exists'. It is the truth of the claims, 'I think' and 'whatever thinks exists' that makes possible the conclusion 'I am' or 'I exist'. Kaphagawani's criticism of Mbiti is that unlike Descartes' there is no coherent helping premise that can be added to give validity to Mbiti's claim.

the historically strained relationship between Africa and the West—a relationship that is characterized by various unpleasant moments, including especially colonialism, which typifies the encounter between the two. As a result, then, contemporary African philosophy, which is a product of this encounter, exists first and foremost as a 'counter colonial practice' since it is in part the response by the colonized to the negative effects of colonialism. This idea is firmly rooted in Emmanuel Eze's view on African philosophy:

> The idea of 'African philosophy' as a field of inquiry thus has its contemporary roots in the effort of African thinkers to combat political and economic exploitations, and to examine, question, and contest identities imposed upon them by Europeans. The claims and counter-claims, justifications and alienations that characterize such historical and conceptual protests and contestations indelibly mark the discipline of African philosophy (1998: 217).

If African philosophy is born out of these protestations and contestations, then negritude as a philosophical movement typifies this feature of African philosophy, for not only does it elevate to the status of philosophy the quest of the once subjugated to free themselves completely from the grip of imperialism, but more importantly, it opens up an avenue for its proponents to sustain the resistance against the metaphysical and cultural misidentification to which Africa and Africans have been subjected by the forces of imperialism. In other words, negritude addresses itself at once as an ideology of difference and resistance, albeit one that implicitly accepts the very Eurocentric assumptions to which it is opposed. Similar remarks apply to the practice of what has come to be known as ethnophilosophy, which reflects a retreat, a 'return to the source' as a way of validating and reaffirming the African identity. In both cases, it is hard to miss the fact that these ideologies are not merely driven by a search for truth but instead by a powerful desire to resist and assert difference. Unsurprisingly, then, those who champion Mbiti's claim as definitive of African personhood are less likely to substantiate it since the primary function of that assertion is merely to relocate the African in a perceived power struggle between Africa and the West. But if the motive behind these philosophical movements had its justification in history, their philosophical status remained suspect as shown by the varied criticisms leveled against them. What this reveals, of course, is

that the creation of meaning is not always at the service of truth; it can sometimes draw its force from non-epistemic sources, particularly, as in this case, the motive of resistance and cultural reaffirmation.

The point I wish to make is that if the history and practice of African philosophy itself reflects a struggle for power, and if that philosophy was largely sustained, at least in its early stages, by this non-epistemic motive, then it seems likely that even the content of that philosophy should also reflect this struggle for power. Indeed, my submission is that the search for a unique and distinctive theory of African personhood and the overall preoccupation with difference that characterizes the often strident defense of the communitarian and normative conception of personhood betrays the same kind of motivation that spurred the articulation and defense of negritude and ethnophilosophy. There is good reason to think that it is the need for cultural reaffirmation of the African identity and a power struggle against the forces of imperialism, which once had a powerful hold on meaning, are what underlie at least in part the view of personhood as culturally and communally engendered. Although this motive may have acquired its legitimacy in history, it is nevertheless true that its utility in current discourse is now defunct.

I have been arguing that since proponents of the communitarian conception of self endorsed their assertions not by appealing to the epistemic validity of the claim (for example, Mbiti's communitarian dictum 'I am because we are') underlying the view that selfhood is socially engendered, but by appealing to the need to reassert the African identity, which was thoroughly decimated by the intellectual forces of imperialism. But it is worth adding that much of the protestations against ethnophilosophy, which, as I indicated earlier, was precipitated by Tempels' Bantu Philosophy, mirror my central point—that is, that the notion of a communal self (or alternatively, the communalism that underlie that notion of selfhood) lacked theoretical justification, but was propelled almost entirely by some non-epistemic motive, which I have identified as a struggle for power. Let me briefly review some of the critical comments on ethnophilosophy with the aim of showing that the denunciation of ethnophilosophical method was in part due to the fact that some of its assumptions lacked epistemic validity. One such assumption involves the idea of collectivity upon which ethnophilosophy hinges.

Consider, for instance, Hountondji's theoretical criticism of ethnophilosophy, which at bottom is a refutation of the unanimity that underlay it. If ethnophilosophy, as Appiah intimated, was founded on two central

assumptions – the factual one, which attributes 'some central body of ideas that is shared by Black Africans quite generally' and the evaluative one, which is the view that 'the recovery of this tradition is worthwhile' (Appiah 1992: 95), then Hountondji's seemingly uncompromising theoretical censure of ethnophilosophy may be described as a repudiation of these two assumptions. A good part of Hountondji's dissatisfaction targets the first assumption – the assumption of unanimity. He was keen to register the point that ethnophilosophy employed a vulgar use of the term philosophy, as indicating a collective, implicit and even unconscious belief system, and that behind this meaning of philosophy 'there is a myth at work, the myth of primitive unanimity, with its suggestion that in 'primitive societies'… everyone always agrees with everyone else' (Hountondji 1983:60). For Hountondji, philosophy in its true sense cannot be found in the collective consciousness of a people, as an established body of truisms but in the discursive activity of individuals. In ethnophilosophical unanimism, Hountondji detected a certain acquiescence to a reified notion of the collective, the quite absurd inference that philosophy was a function of a collective consciousness or whole communities and a subsequent relegation of individual consciousness, which, on his view, should be the springboard for the emergence of a responsible discourse and of authentic philosophizing.

Importantly, Hountondji's attack on the foundations of ethnophilosophical reason leaves us in no doubt whatsoever as to the underlying motive compelling the idea of a collective, unanimous philosophy. In his view, the motive was primarily non-epistemic and it explains why 'so many African authors, in various tones and moods, struck up the Tempelsian theme …' (1983: 48). Here is Hountondji (1983: 48),

> We have already identified this desire: African intellectuals wanted at all costs to rehabilitate themselves in their own eyes and in the eyes of Europe. To do so, they were prepared to leave no stone unturned, and they were only too happy to discover, through Tempels' notorious Bantu Philosophy, a type of argu-mentation that could, despite its ambiguities (or, rather, thanks to them), serve as one way of ensuring this rehabilitation.

Hountondji's reference to ambiguities is worth noting. For, despite its theoretical inadequacies or ambiguities, which Hountondji locates in its

assumption of unanimism, ethnophilosophical reason survived propelled by this non-epistemic motive: the desire to rehabilitate. Yet, Hountondji is not alone in holding ethnophilosophy up to scrutiny.

In his recent book, *Self and Community in a Changing World* (2010), DA Masolo devotes considerable attention to the same subject. His contribution to the debate on the status of ethnophilosophy is chiefly mediated through his interest in the role of indigenous knowledge systems in the global project of knowledge production. He shares this interest with Hountondji, who over the years has been the target of criticisms regarding what his critics perceived to be his refusal to accord any significance to local knowledge forms, which they believed ethnophilosophy exemplified. For the most part, Masolo and Hountondji are in agreement about the indispensability of indigenous knowledge forms as the basis for authentic development. Consequently, Masolo shows a deep appreciation for the idea that ethnophilosophical data provides an interesting starting point for philosophical analysis, while spurning the idea that that body of ideas constitutes a philosophy. Hountondji's more recent clarification in his *Struggle for Meaning* (2002) comes very close to Masolo's position, which, I believe, is also shared by Kwasi Wiredu (1980) and Kwame Anthony Appiah (1992). The latter notes that,

> if philosophers are to contribute – at the conceptual level – to the solution of Africa's real problems, then they need to begin with a deep understanding of the traditional conceptual worlds the vast ajority of their fellow nationals inhabit … what is wrong with the ethnophilosophers is that they have never gone beyond this essentially preliminary step (Appiah 1992: 106).

Notwithstanding, these scholars, in particular Masolo and Appiah, argue that the core assumption of an African world construed as a metaphysical entity upon which claims of unanimity are advanced represents a 'myth', an impulse that should be rejected. Masolo, recounting this aspect of Hountondji's criticism of ethnophilosophy, argues that,

> because it is unlikely that a whole community or nation will desire the same thing or desire any one thing for the same reason and goals, the notion of development as driven by unanimity about the objects

> of desire can only be [an] ideal at best (2010: 27).

If the assumption of unanimity was a problematic feature in ethnophilosophical thought, and if, as we find in Hountondji and Appiah, that assumption derives from the belief in a collective consciousness or an African world metaphysically construed, then it seems to follow that the protestations against ethnophilosophy were in part protestations against not just unanimism but more importantly the idea of collectivity that engenders it. My contention is that this idea of collectivity undergirds the African communitarian conception of personhood under consideration. Put differently, Mbiti's dictum can best be understood as applying an idea of the collective as a metaphysical aggregate upon which individual persons depend. And just as this idea in the context of personhood is not advanced on the basis of its epistemic merit but on what I have been calling a non-epistemic motive, so also the unanimism of ethnophilosophical thought.

By way of summary, then, there are two reasons motivating the hypothesis that the widely received communitarian notion of personhood is in part a reflection of a struggle for power. First, that conception of personhood hinges on a philosophically disputed claim about the ontological dependence of the individual on the community. Mbiti's claim, I have suggested, fails the test of validity and so its plausibility couldn't be the motivation behind the defense of the resulting communitarian and normative conception of personhood. I have tried to corroborate this claim by drawing attention to some of the vigorous criticisms of ethnophilosophical reason, in particular that strand of the trend that revolves around the idea of collective unanimism. Second, the need to assert difference and to reaffirm African culture emerges as a strong motive-candidate for the communitarian and normative conception of personhood. Combining these two insights, we arrive at the conclusion that the primary motivation of that conception of personhood is non-epistemic—a struggle for power and the need for cultural reaffirmation. It seems to me that this is one way we may make sense of Riesman's assertion that the creation of meaning, in this case the meaning personhood, almost always involves a struggle for power.

The Social Basis of Personhood

The idea that personhood is socially engendered operates on the basic

assumption that personhood, whatever it is, cannot be abstracted from social or communal facts. In other words, personhood cannot be conceived as separable from certain facts about how the social world of individuals is constituted. I intend to examine some of these social facts that are held to be person-determining with the aim of pointing out their direct link to social power. I take this as an alternative way of establishing the link between the relevant notion of personhood and power; it will require examining closely the content of that conception.

If Placide Tempels and John Mbiti set out the metaphysical groundwork for the conception of personhood as socially engendered, then it was the Nigerian philosopher Ifeanyi Menkiti who provided the essential details regarding its content. His seminal paper 'Person and Community in African Thought' (1984) may be regarded as a *locus classicus* in the African literature on personhood. In this widely cited work, Menkiti laid out in remarkable clarity and some detail not only the worldview that gives metaphysical prop to the communitarian and normative conception of personhood but also the processes of how individuals are held to come to acquire and ultimately lose personhood.

Taking Mbiti's claim as his starting point, Menkiti distinguishes between African and Western conceptions of personhood, broadly labeling the latter as minimal and the former as maximal. The terminologies he employs in articulating the distinction are quite appropriate given what he has to say about the two approaches to personhood. Western conceptions are minimal precisely because they identify personhood with some static and isolated characteristic of which the human being is in possession. By definition, then, personhood in Western thought is a metaphysical given and the idea of its later acquisition makes little or no sense. It appears that Menkiti takes this possession criterion for determining personhood to be minimal because it sets the bar for personhood rather low by giving short shrift to the role community plays in shaping personal identity. By contrast, Menkiti believes that the African conception of personhood offers a maximal criterion insofar as it does not merely assert that personhood is something that is metaphysically given but instead locates the criterion for full personhood in the active role the community plays in evolving individuals into persons.

This leads Menkiti to the conclusion that the African conception corresponds to the social production of persons: individuals start out as non-persons presumably and through prescribed processes of induction into

society and socialization through various stages of development become persons. And Menkiti makes light work of the point arguing that,

> it is not enough to have before us the biological organism, with whatever rudimentary psychological characteristics are seen as attaching to it. We must also conceive of this organism as going through a long process of social and ritual transformation until it attains the full complement of excellencies seen as truly definitive of [a person] (1984: 172).

The mere possession of some metaphysically given attribute doesn't automatically qualify one as a member of the community of persons—a point Menkiti labours for most of the paper by alluding to the status of children as non-persons who through various predefined social processes come to attain the status of person. All these beg the question of what transpires in the intervening points in the personhood continuum.

Menkiti's paper may be read as a direct response to the question—indeed, what is particularly fascinating about the paper is the manner in which he details the process by which individuals make the transition to personhood. To my mind, and for my present purposes, it is this aspect of Menkiti's undertaking that elicit philosophical interest as it opens up opportunities for exploring from a different angle the connection between this notion of personhood and power. For in detailing the route to acquiring personhood in community, Menkiti may have inadvertently revealed not only the conditions of individuals in community but more importantly the nature of the social space in which individuals through established cultural practices come to acquire personhood. Exploring the structure of that social space, which ostensibly engenders personhood, as well as the various processes involved in the acquisition of personhood in the sense at issue, is the key to working out the interplay between personhood and power. I should reiterate that my aim in this section is merely to demonstrate that the view of personhood as socially engendered rests heavily on the social power differentials among individuals in community.

In demonstrating this hypothesis, my strategy is to identify various constitutive elements of social space and to establish the varied relations each one bears to the notion of personhood under consideration. Take, for instance, the connection Menkiti draws between personhood and seniority, which,

coupled with epistemic access, is a necessary condition for acquiring maximal personhood. In his view, it is impossible to make the transition from the status of non-person to person without having epistemic access to the values and overall knowledge base of one's culture:

> [t]hat full personhood is not perceived as simply given at the very beginning of one's life, but is attained after one is well along in society, indicates straight away that the older an individual gets the more of a person he becomes. As an Igbo proverb has it, 'What an old man sees sitting down, a young man cannot see standing up (1984: 173).

It is worth noting that this alleged link between age (and/or seniority) and personhood has been questioned[5]. Yet, my immediate aim is not to develop a criticism of the conception of personhood but rather to point out how that conception of personhood treads on the differentials in social power among individuals.

The point here is related to Kaphagawani's suggestion that the conception of personhood as socially engendered relies heavily on the 'epistemological monopoly' of the old over the young (2004: 338). For if knowledge is power in the sense that being in its possession affords individuals epistemic access to culture as the ultimate prescriber of norms, then individuals who have knowledge occupy a position of power relative to individuals who don't (i.e. lack epistemic access). This means that personhood, which is dependent on seniority, which is itself necessary for acquiring social power in the form of epistemic access, must ultimately depend on the differentials of social power. But while this observation doesn't by itself raise specific difficulties for this conception of personhood, it is enough to demonstrate that the relevant conception of personhood is contingent on the differential in social power—in this case, the social determinant being seniority and epistemic access.

Another aspect of culture that is causally linked to personhood is an individual's social standing, since according to Menkiti one's station in community plays some crucial role in the notion of personhood as socially acquired (1984: 172). This connection is borne out by the evidence put

[5] See Kwame Gyekye (1997).

forward by social anthropologists. Among the Lugbara, for instance, the title of personhood is determined by social standing, the determining factor being whether or not individuals occupy social positions that will allow them to transit into ancestorhood after death. Similarly, among the Songhay an individual's social standing determines the set of standards to which that individual must comply and consequently the expectations society has of that individual. Thus, as Riesman notes, the,

> stereotypically 'noble,' 'dignified' behaviour of the master, and the 'shameless' behaviour of the captive are thus understood as an expression of their different social statuses (1996: 100).

But there are other ways in which individual social standing in community can be cashed out. I have in mind individual belonging to particular social class. For example, people who are wealthy or are so perceived would naturally be more powerful than those who are not since personhood is contingent upon intragroup recognition, which those in esteemed social class are more likely to enjoy than those who are not. A slave is less likely than his master to receive social recognition and affirmation because of his social standing in community, and if these factors are constitutive of social structure, then a view of personhood as socially engendered must be contingent upon them[6].

The point here is that if personhood is a function of individual standing in society and if that social space reflects deep differences in the social standing of individuals, whether economic or otherwise, then the resulting conception of personhood must be grounded on such differences.

One final relation worth considering is that between ritual/socialization practices and personhood – a relation Menkiti suggests is necessary, if not sufficient, for personhood in the maximal sense. He claims that,

> the African emphasized the rituals of incorporation and the

[6] See Gail Presbey's 'Massai Concepts of Personhood: the Roles of Recognition, Community, and Individuality' (2002) for a detailed discussion of the point that personhood in African thought is fundamentally a matter of intragroup recognition.

> overarching necessity of learning the social rules by which the community lives, so that what was initially biologically given can … become a person with all the inbuilt excellencies implied by the term (1984: 173).

He is even more strident when making the point that, 'Without incorporation into this or that community, individuals are considered to be mere danglers to whom the description 'person' does not fully apply' (1984:172). All this implies that one couldn't possibly be a person without undergoing certain prescribed processes of induction, through rites of initiation and other socialization processes, into some actual community. But not only is the relation between rituals/socialization practices and personhood a necessary one, according to Menkiti, it is also causal since these processes can transform the individual as it were from the status of non-person to person, thus executing a qualitative change in the individual.

Yet, the received wisdom in social anthropology is that even these processes of ritual incorporation and socialization cannot be easily cast in gender-neutral terms. Consider, for example, Herbert's suggestion that rites of initiation are structured with a special sensitivity to gender. She suggests that in general various rites of passage are typically overseen by full-fledged members of community of comparable gender. Thus, the ritualistic passage from boyhood to manhood falls primarily within the province of the men in the community. It is under their tutelage that a young boy learns the requisite social skills and rules of behavior befitting a man as his culture defines it. According to Herbert, this is also true in the case of 'girl's initiation, which as a rebirth into adult womanhood, orchestrated by women, falls entirely within their natural domain' (1993:229). The practice of ritual incorporation and the on-going socialization processes in community are not gender neutral, and so being necessarily related to these social determinants, personhood must also be contingent on them. But that's not all. The structure of social space also reveals other forms of distinctions along the lines of gender.

As Riesman recounts,

> [I]n Nuer social life, men and women observe not only a strict division of labour in connection with cattle and religion but also a differentiated code of behaviour in which the man is always supposed to show greater self-mastery than woman (1996: 98).

What this clearly implies is that rules of behaviour and social expectations, and by extension individual responsibilities that are expressive of them, are couched in a language that is sensitive to gender. Here one is reminded of Achebe's portrayal of a fictional African culture that is socially organized mainly on the basis of gender, such that individual responsibilities are correspondingly gendered. For instance, in one passage we are informed that in Umuofia the responsibility of carrying a man's stool is the male preserve of a son (Achebe 1994: 31). Yet, if compliance to these gendered social rules of behaviour and expectations constitute a necessary condition for acquiring personhood in community, as Menkiti suggests, then it seems to follow once again that this notion of personhood treads on the distinctions between the genders.

Another way to express the role of gender in the formation of social personhood is to indicate that the practice of acquiring personhood takes place in the public domain of ritualistic induction into community, socialization, compliance to social rules of behaviour and communal recognition of success and accomplishments. Although the view doesn't categorically rule out private efforts towards the acquisition of personhood, it seems clear that intra-group recognition is a necessary condition. However, intra-group recognition is a public practice and therefore a feature not of the private world of individuals but of the public domain. But if personhood is essentially acquired in public sphere, and if individuals in community are identified by their roles, then it seems to follow straightforwardly that those individuals whose roles are predominantly suited to the private domain, and as such are not active players in the public domain, are *ipso facto* constrained in terms of their capacity to attain maximal personhood.

The point I wish to emphasize is that when considered from a normative point of view, gendered relations connote a hierarchy of some sort indicating that power relations are implicit in gender relations. In particular, individuals gendered as male are usually seen as having more access to social power than their female counterparts. Thus what is implied is not the mere observation that the distinctive African view of personhood as socially acquired is necessarily gendered, but more importantly that that conception of personhood necessarily depends on a hierarchical ordering and distribution of social power facilitated by gender. The point should now be obvious. Since these cultural practices bear a necessary and causal relation to acquired personhood, it must be the case that the ensuing notion of personhood is

contingent upon the social power differentials instantiated by these gendered practices. In particular, if social power is favourably distributed to individuals who are implicitly or explicitly gendered as male, then it appears to be given that the resulting notion of personhood must be sensitive to these differences.

In summary, the manner in which social space is organized plays a critical role in the emergence of the differentiation in individual access to power. That is to say, the nature of social space impacts heavily on individual capacity to affect the other, thus conditioning the possibilities of individuals for attaining social personhood. Since the organization of social space conditions the possibilities of individual chances of acquiring maximal personhood and since gendered spaces are integral to organizing social space, then it seems that an individual's gender grouping can substantially impact that individual's success as a person-candidate, or so I maintain. Indeed, women and men as representatives of two broad gender categories are often identified by their roles, the latter being predominantly identified by roles and responsibilities that figure in the private and domestic sphere. This constrains the active participation in the public domain, thus significantly impacting unfavourably on whatever chances of success at maximal personhood they may have had. In addition, individual social standing and epistemic access which privileges the elderly also constrain individuals as far as acquiring personhood is concerned.

All these—seniority, social class and gender—represent distinct modes by which power relations are constituted. Importantly, each one seem to bear a necessary relation to the idea of personhood as socially acquired—i.e. the communitarian/normative conception of personhood. Since this is the case, it should follow that a theoretical interpretation of how persons are socially produced cannot be divorced from the actual power relations that constitute the social structure on which the production of persons take place. Thus this conception of personhood treads dangerously on the actual differences in social power distribution among individuals in community.

Personhood and the Moral Equality of Persons

A plausible theory of personhood should be able to explain why it is the case that we intuitively believe that all persons are morally equal. This intuition is one I deem to be uncontroversial – that is, in spite of the obvious differences

among individuals it seems true that morally we can assert a basic equality among persons. My suspicion is that a conception of personhood that is grounded on contingent facts about the ideology of seniority and epistemic access; the specifics of ritual incorporation and socialization processes, which I argue are almost always gendered; and social standing, cannot adequately explain what it is about persons that makes them equal morally since it takes these basic social differences among individuals to be constitutive of personhood.

In the preceding section, I have already suggested that the social space in which persons are produced is, on the conception under consideration, constituted by power relations, thus indicating that study in concepts of socially engendered personhood will need to consider power differentials among individuals. Along the way, I argued that gender alongside seniority and social standing as categories of social organization play a crucial role in determining individual access to social power and so is a useful tool in analyzing the differentials of power that characterize social context in which personhood is believed to be acquired. One probable objection to this submission would be to undercut the connection I make between gender relations and social power differentials among individuals in community.

The objection may be formulated in two distinct ways. First, it could be framed in terms of a total rejection of the thesis that gender constitutes a principle around which African communities are organized. This rejection would imply that in traditional African societies individual access to power was not determined on the basis of gender, precisely because the category of gender was non-existent and as such never the primary organizing social principle. On this probable objection, then, any attempt to establish a connection between personhood and social power distribution on the basis of gender is highly speculative. I take this to be Oyeronke Oyewumi's response to the suggestion that inequalities in power, facilitated by gender distinctions, were deeply entrenched in traditional African societies. Beginning with an examination of the structure of Yoruba language, she reaches the conclusion that the concept of gender is entirely foreign to the Yoruba social system; it is a category that was imported to Africa through colonialism. The absence of gender in language, she maintains, should indicate straightaway the absence of actual power differentials along the lines of gender in traditional Yoruba society. If this is right, then it seems that the claim that the communitarian

and normative conception of personhood rests on gendered disparities in access to power is mistaken precisely because there were no such inequalities (Oyewumi 1997).

The argument seems persuasive enough. However, it quickly begins to lose its initial appeal as soon as it is pointed out that it must rely heavily on the dubious assumption that social reality is entirely reducible to the configurations of language in such a way that what is not captured in the latter cannot by reason of that fact be constitutive of social reality. This is hard to believe[7]. A more plausible claim can be made it seems, and this is the second way to formulate the objection, that a gendered social structure does not straightforwardly entail inequalities in social power between members of the relevant gendered groups. That is to say, even if it is conceded that gendered spaces are a pervasive feature of social structure, this fact doesn't by itself establish that there are inequalities and power differentials structured along the lines of gender. Perhaps, the gender divisions are more fluid, permitting individuals to assume roles across gender. This way of formulating the objection comes very close to the point Ifi Amadiume makes in her book, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*. There she maintains that gender is a pervasive feature of *Nnobi* society but nevertheless insists on a certain degree of flexibility that ensured that social power wasn't necessarily distributed on the basis of maleness or femaleness. Employing the concepts of 'male daughters' and 'female husbands', she attempts to establish how social roles and the benefits attached to them can be available to individuals irrespective of gender. Consider, for instance, the practice of 'female husbands', which allowed women who are economically able to assume the role, traditionally associated with men, of marrying a woman or paying for her fertility in cases where they are barren and cannot fulfill the responsibilities of motherhood (1987: 72).

Suppose, then, that one was opposed to the idea that the communitarian and normative account of personhood rests on social power differentials among individuals, and argued along with Amadiume, that gendered relations do not necessarily connote unequal power relations, there are two possible replies that can be furnished. First, the position defended here doesn't rely solely on gender in establishing the unequal distribution of social power among individuals. Other modes of power relations have been

[7] See Bakare-Yusuf (2003).

explored including those generated by social class or position and the ideology of seniority. So, even if it were conceded that the category of gender is not a particularly useful tool for exploring these differentials in social power, it could still be maintained that other forms of power relations exist within social space. These other forms of power can provide as it were a substructure upon which the concept of socially engendered personhood depends, thus leaving the central claim of this paper impervious to Amadiume's contentions. Yet, I do not make that concession. This leads me to the second point, which is that Amadiume's attempt to show the flexible nature of gender relations ultimately leads her to counterintuitively support the thesis that social power distribution is in fact a function of both gender and social class. This is so because of the twofold reason that Amadiume already explicitly claimed that there is evidence of asymmetry between the genders in *Nnobi* society and implicitly suggested that the so-called 'female husbands' are represented as powerful not merely because they are women but because they fitted into a particular social class (i.e. they are rich). This means that Amadiume's arguments do not succeed in showing that there is asymmetry of power between male and female genders in *Nnobi* society, but merely that social class is one of the important ways in which social power is mediated in that society.

As it turns out, then, gender, seniority and social class represent multiple forms of power relations that constitute social structure. Consequently, the concept of personhood as socially engendered must rest on these modes of power relations. Indeed, it seems impossible to construe this notion of personhood otherwise. Yet, this is merely an observation that finds support in social anthropology; it doesn't yet constitute a criticism of the conception of personhood. In what follows, I suggest what I think are a philosopher's reasons for adopting an epistemic posture of suspicion about the idea that personhood is socially engendered.

The first is that proponents of this conception of personhood often gloss over these inequalities in social power when conceptualizing the social nature of personhood. As a result, theorizing about personhood, although originally premised on these actual social differences, is ultimately abstracted from the realities. This is so because the term personhood indicates something all individuals share or have in common – either in its actuality or, as in the case of personhood as acquired, its potentiality. That is, it is a common feature about individuals like you and me that we have the potential

to become persons in a social context, if we are not already so. In this sense, the capacity for acquiring personhood is a distinctive mark of human individuals as opposed to other kinds of individual existences. Therefore, theorizing about personhood turns out to be a way of conceptualizing what we all have in common. But in theorizing about what we all as human individuals share proponents of the communitarian and normative conception of personhood run the risk of glossing over the actual differences in social power and other forms of inequalities that characterize the actual lives of individuals in social space. This risk is particularly more acute for the proponent of the view that personhood is contingent on the nature of specific social contexts, since this would imply that actual social inequalities that characterize the relevant social context must reflect in the degrees of personhood individuals acquire.

For example, if it is a feature of social space that individuals gendered as female have little access to social power and it is true that personhood being socially engendered must be sensitive to actual differences in social power, then the degree of personhood a female member of community can acquire is socially conditioned by her gender[8]. Conversely, an individual implicitly or explicitly gendered as male should enjoy a higher degree of personhood since personhood on this view is socially determined. Yet, if 'person' picks out the ultimate bearer of moral value, such a distinction in degrees of personhood based on gender (seniority or social class) is particularly troubling from a moral point of view, since it could

[8] Indeed, if we press the issue of the gendered nature of social personhood what we find is that the person-status of women vis-à-vis men in a social context is suspect – although proponents of this conception of person fail to acknowledge it. One way this is clear is the near, if not total absence of women in the world of ancestors. But if personhood is a phase in the continuum of human development according to the relevant conception of personhood and ancestorhood represents the apogee of the human career, as Menkiti claims, then it seems the absence of women in the world of ancestors in African thought may have something to do with their lower person-status vis-à-vis men who populate the ancestral world. This is so because one must be a full person in the sense being considered in this article in order to be an ancestor, but if women are not members of the ancestral world, then perhaps they do not enjoy the status of full personhood.

justify unequal treatment of individuals depending on the degree of personhood they have acquired.

The point I wish to make here is that proponents of the view that personhood is socially determined run the risk of employing 'person' as a blanket term that is applicable to all individuals in society, thus giving short shrift to their primary supposition, which is that personhood must be grounded on the actual social conditions in which individuals find themselves. Defenders of the thesis that personhood is socially determined must take the idea to its logical conclusion by explicitly affirming not only that older members of community have a higher degree of personhood relative to younger members of the community (as Menkiti claims) but also that individuals gendered as male and those in highly recognized social ranks (e.g. the rich) have by virtue of their genders and social position a higher degree of personhood relative to other individuals in social context who are not similarly placed. But if this is done, then, it would seem that proponents of this notion of personhood would have a hard time explaining what it is about persons that make them morally equal. My intuition is that equality of persons is a moral ideal that cannot be fully explained by a theory of personhood that appeals to contingencies about gender, the ideology of seniority or epistemic access and social standing—in short, facts that the communitarian and normative conception of personhood take to be fundamental.

This leads me to a second and related point, which is that proponents of the view of personhood as socially engendered tacitly assume an egalitarian social space in which the acquisition of personhood takes place. They do this by insisting that this conception of personhood being relational connotes reciprocity among individuals – this is based on the idea that one cannot be a person without others, indicating that individuals in a social context mutually influence each other towards attaining personhood. Rather than conceive the individual as an isolated and autonomous subject who stands apart from others and independently acts upon the world around her, impinging, as it were, her will on others, proponents of this conception of personhood theoretically depict an individual as already embedded in a network of constitutive relationships so that the individual is as much impacted upon as she impacts on others as well. Thus, on this relational picture of personhood, the exercise of social power is very much dynamic and mutually influencing rather than static and one dimensional.

Yet, in order for this sort of mutual influence to be possible, it must

be the case that the social context is in an important sense egalitarian and the relationships in which individuals are embedded are relations of equality – a supposition that flies in the face of the available evidence in social anthropology, some of which I have been exploring. So, there seem to be a paradox. This notion of personhood as socially determined must rest on the social power differentials among individuals that are constitutive of social relations and yet it must also assume an egalitarian social order, an equal playing field, as it were, in which agents mutually impact on one another towards the attainment of personhood. This seems quite odd. At best, then, this conception of personhood is expressive of a wish. If the actual social realities and relations in which individuals are located are not egalitarian, and if proponents of the view of personhood must implicitly assume an egalitarian social structure for the acquisition of personhood, then that conception of personhood must be expressive of the wish that society and social relations were in fact egalitarian. That is, this view of personhood seems to be rooted in our desire for an egalitarian society.

Although in principle there is nothing wrong for a theory of personhood to articulate a wish—in particular, our wish for a social space that is characterized by relations of equality, it has to be pointed out that there is a logical gap between what is and what we wish were the case. The idea of personhood as socially engendered in a system of social relations that are unequal is fundamentally different to one involving the social production of persons in an egalitarian social context. The point here is that this conception of personhood proceeds as though the latter were in fact the case and, as a result, glosses over the actual nature of the social space in which personhood is acquired. Until the social space in which personhood is acquired is sufficiently expressive of equal power distribution among individuals, the idea of personhood as socially engendered remains an expression of wishful thinking, if, that is, the moral equality of all persons is to be adequately accounted for.

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