

Western tradition versus East Asian tradition

* Western – Europeans, Americans, British

* Eastern (Asian) – Indian, Chinese; Korea, Japanese

Contrary to the defence of universality of the process of thinking among humans by psychologists, these 2 different traditions have maintained different systems of thought for thousands of years.

Westerners:

1. Their thoughts rest on predictability of the behavior of objects – physical, animal, human.
2. Strong interest in categorization which facilitates the formulation and application of standardized rules to objects
3. Formal logic indispensable in problem solving
4. Individualistic or independent nature

Easterners:

1. The world is more complex and hence not easily predictable
2. Approach objects as a complex entity
3. Events are not explained by simple formal logic but requires consideration of a host of factors that operate in relation to one another in no simple, deterministic way.
4. Formal logic is considered too simplistic in understanding reality and problem solving
5. Broad, contextual view of the world

On the Concept of Self

The Self In the East and the West: part of a whole versus a unitary free agent.

West

- Quest for (overestimation of) distinctiveness
- Individuals and control
- Oriented towards personal goals; resist the group getting in the way
- Preference for equality or superiority
- Level playing ground for all
- Sense of self in relation to the group (smaller circle outside the larger circle)

East

- Self-reflecting cultural prejudice against individuality
- Less concerned about personal goals than the west
- Precedence to harmonious relationship; success a group thing

- Sense of self in relation to group (part of the larger circle)

*Independence Vs. Interdependence

- In the west, independence is drummed into the child's brain from the crib. The difference is clear between the East and the West (babies sleeping alone in separate room away from their parents in the West compared with the East and other parts of the world).
- In training the child, Asians tend to focus on feelings and social relations whereas the focus is on objects and how they affect the individual in the West.
- Easterners live in an interdependent world in which the self is part of a larger whole whereas westerners live in a world in which the self is a unitary free agent

The Concept of Person in African Philosophy

Generally, the nature of the discussion of the concept of person in African philosophy takes two forms: the communitarian view and the metaphysical view.

The Communitarian View

*** The first view that is held by Tempels, Mbiti and Menkiti states that personhood in Africa is a social concept that is attained through communal relations that an individual involves himself in.

Holds that personhood is socially sanctioned through an individual's participation in her respective community and depends largely on her ability to fulfil her social obligations.

In this view, personhood is expressed in terms of communal relations. Personhood is presented as something that is to be measured in terms of how the individual conducts herself and how she relates to other people in her personal interactions and the community at large.

There are certain obligations that are prescribed to every individual and each individual is expected to meet these obligations.

The status of personhood is a derivative of communal standing. Those who have a reputable standing (according to communal dictates) are more authentic persons than those who are morally in error.

The individual's personal identity is inseparable from her community's own aspirations and goals. The individual is fused to the community such that she cannot separate her own goals from the broad aspirations of her community.

Menkiti, I. (1984). Person and Community in African Traditional Thought.

- There are 2 main difference between African traditional understanding of “person,” and Westerners’ conception
 1. In the Western view, a man is a single individual; and that singleness is what makes an entity a “man.” But in the African view, a man is defined only in reference to his community, not by any of his physical or psychological characteristics. It is only by “rootedness” in one’s own community that he may come to be known as a man. In the African view it is the community which defines the person as person, not some isolated static quality of rationality, will, or memory. John Mbiti writes: “I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am.”
 2. The second difference lies in the “*processual*” nature of being in African belief...that one becomes a person, only after a *process* of incorporation into a community. Personhood, then, becomes something which must be attained, and not granted simply because one is born human. In African society, this incorporation is a long process of “social and ritual transformation” to acquire qualities sufficient for personhood. The community plays a significant role in this process.

- Minimal vs maximal definition

While Westerners have a minimal definition of man (whatever has a soul and rationality is a person), Africans have a maximal definition. By the African definition, personhood is something an individual could fail to become, could be incompetent at, etc. Personhood must be attained through incorporation and the learning of social rules.

- Personhood and Age

Since personhood is not something one is born with, but rather something he must attain over time, it follows that one becomes more of a person the older he gets. With age comes not only wisdom, but other qualities related to personhood. This improvement in regards to personhood qualities is referred to as “ontological progression.”

The Idea of the ontological progression can even be seen in western societies with newborns sometimes being referred to as “it.” In Africa, burial ceremonies for older citizens are much more elaborate and melancholy than those of young children.

- Personhood and Ethical maturity

Menkiti argues that for one to be considered a full person, that individual has to exhibit moral worth that is beyond question or rebuke. He claims that the English language supports this notion of personhood as a status that is gradually acquired, by noting that it is acceptable, grammatically, in English, to refer to a baby as an ‘it’ while the same reference cannot be used for an adult. The transition from an ‘it,’ as a baby to a him/her, as an adult depends largely on the moral conduct of the individual.

Children who have not yet taken on the obligations and responsibilities of their community, The fulfillment of these obligations is what moves children without an ethical sense to a full person-adult with ethical maturity.

John Rawls reveals the need for the development of ‘a moral pesonality’ in Western conception of self. He claims that possessing a moral personality is essential to personhood.

- Personhood and Death

After death, the members of the community are considered continuously present; and their living relatives call on them for support frequently. At this stage, the living still refer to these dead by their names, granting them some personhood even in death.

However, over time, deceased ancestors lose their names and identities, as they once again become unincorporated beings.

- Existentialism on self versus African conception

In many existential writings, the authors encourage the person to create meaning in an otherwise meaningless and absurd existence. Jean-Paul Sartre, a French existentialist, wrote that an individual is nothing until he makes something of himself, and then he becomes that something.

While these beliefs sound similar to African traditional beliefs (as both philosophies discuss attaining personhood), existential beliefs differ in that they rely on personal choices made by the individual independent of society. The African view necessarily refers to becoming a person inside his community, and that community plays an important role in the individual’s transformation into personhood.

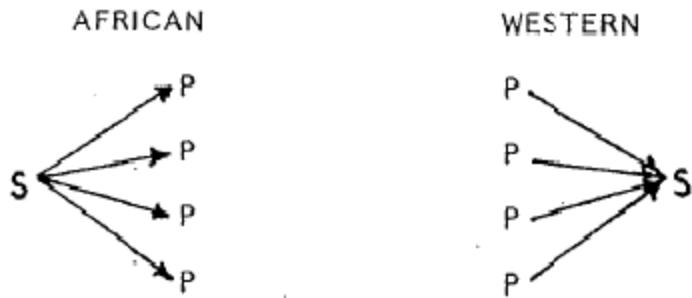
- Community

**In Western understanding, community is

- a group of persons (each with their own persistent individuality) who come together to accomplish a task that could not be accomplished singly.
- think of the aggregated sum of individuals forming a body
- an inorganic group of individuals constituted into something more like an association.

**In African understanding

- The African community, rather, is an organic collective of people.



This diagram illustrates the difference.

- “The African view...moves from society to individuals, the Western view moves instead from individuals to society.”

Synthesis

1. Western societies are organized around the ideal of individualism and individual rights. Government and society are considered to be created in the defense of one's rights. On the other hand, African societies are based on requirements of duty. The priority is placed on a person's duties to the collective, and his rights are considered secondary in importance.
2. Menkiti argues that the individual can only become ‘man’ because of the existence of the community and the community, in his view, must take epistemic and ontological precedence over the individual. Menkiti makes it quite clear that in Africa it is the community that defines and gives the status of personhood to individuals. In his own words; “in the African view it is the community which defines the person, and not some isolated static quality of rationality, will or memory”
3. If an individual maintains good communal relations with others and is in good standing with her community then she is a full person. If on the other hand she has poor relations with her fellow community members or is selfish she is seen as a non-person. Menkiti adds that for an individual to become a full person she has to exhibit moral worth and if she fails to exhibit minimal moral characteristics, she would have failed at being a person.

African Metaphysical conception of Self

*** The second view of personhood in Africa is grounded in metaphysics. Generally this view as argued for by Appiah, Wiredu, Gyekye, Okolo etc.

- person is essentially made up of mainly three elements, which are the soul, the spirit and the body.

The second form of discussion on the nature of person in African thought attempts to find and ground an understanding of person that is not necessarily tied to communal encumbrances. It takes the position that there are certain key characteristics that constitute personhood. These characteristics are taken to be largely independent of communal relations. These characteristics can be generally stated as the soul, the spirit and the body. These characteristics are taken to be constitutive of personhood.

Gyekye argues that what he terms radical communitarianism, as supported by Mbiti and Menkiti, does not recognise individual freedom. He claims that although an individual is a social being he is also other things. The other things that he has in mind concern attributes such as virtue, the ability to make individual choice and rationality. He argues that if these attributes play any meaningful role in the individual's life like setting goals and making important decisions, then it cannot be said that an individual is completely defined by the social structures that she finds herself in. He concedes that although many of our goals are set by the communities we live in, it is still possible for individuals to make their own choices and decide on what goals to pursue and what to give up.

Gyekye argues that there are certain proverbs that exist in his language which clearly show that it is accurate to conceive the individual as an entity that exists on his own and who is responsible for what happens to him in his own life. The individual is not completely at the mercy of communal dictates but does have responsibility for her own fate and decisions. He terms his version moderate communitarianism and argues that it is the defensible version that should be preferred over Mbiti and Menkiti's radical versions.

Gyekye is echoed by Chukwudum B. Okolo who in his effort to understand the self found that the traditional African position tended to emphasise the communitarian aspect at the expense of the distinctness of the individual. He argues that while the self is social it is important to also note that it is an entity that exists apart of its fellow community members and claims that this fact is recognised in African philosophy.