
The Nexus between ‘Person’, Personhood, and Community in Kwame Gyekye’s Philosophy

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Abstract

It is not the case that ‘person’ and ‘personhood’ could always be used in the same contexts. In African philosophy, especially, they are deemed as concepts that are connected but significantly different in some respects. While the concept of a person is discussed only sometimes in connection with the notion of community, personhood seems to be discussed always in connection with latter. In the philosophy of the renowned Ghanaian thinker, Kwame Gyekye, evidence of this is found. However, the relationships between these concepts are so complex that in the works of Gyekye, a clear, simple position of his is sometimes difficult to find. This article does not discuss the usual subject of the clash of rights between the individual and the community. However, it offers to show how the concepts of ‘person’, personhood, and community are presented in Gyekye’s works. The article argues that Gyekye’s interpretation of personhood in Akan philosophy is unclear and that given the relationship which personhood has with the concept of the community, aspects of his arguments for moderate communitarianism are negatively affected.

Introduction

In Akan philosophy, there are various conceptions of a person but the key ones come in the form of ontology and the normative. The ontological sense of a person relates to the make-up of the human

being, as in what sorts of things constitute a human being. But there is also a sense in which a person is understood in terms of her moral (or normative) being-ness. These two are roughly what ‘person’ and ‘personhood’ stand for, respectively, in this article. For the sake of clarity it needs to be pointed out that it is on the basis of how one is deemed to conduct oneself in the community that one’s personhood status is assessed. But how else are these concepts – person, personhood and community – connected? And how clearly does Gyekye interpret these? Could the difficulties in Gyekye be resolved?

Gyekye’s views are important for an article such as this because he is not only one of the prominent philosophers Africa has produced, but he has made key contributions to the debate on African conceptions of ‘person’, personhood and communitarianism, originating the concept of ‘moderate communitarianism’ as a result. Gyekye has published widely on Akan philosophy and, as such, only some major, relevant works of his such as *Tradition and Modernity* (1997), *Person and Community* (1992) and the *Essay on African Philosophical Thought* (1995) will be referred to in this article. This article has five sections. It begins with the discussion of the concept of a ‘person’, followed by one on personhood, and then community. But it should be noted that a discussion of the notion of community in a philosophical sense is often tied to the concept of communitarianism in African philosophy. In the last two sections, the relationship between the ontological conception of a person and community, and personhood and community are examined. It is in these two sections that the questions raised above (which relate to clarity and difficulties in Gyekye’s positions) will be discussed.

Gyekye and the Concept of a Person

A person as understood by Gyekye (1995: 85) is made up of three distinct entities: the *okra* (the soul), *sunsum* (spirit) and the *nipadua* (body). The *okra* is believed to be given by God (*Onyame*) and also bears the destiny of the human being (Gyekye 1995: 85; Wiredu 1983: 120). And since God is conceived of as good, human destiny which comes from God is good as well (Gyekye 1995: 116). It is the bearer of life, so Gyekye and Kwasi Wiredu both assert that the presence of *okra* in a human being guarantees life and its absence in the human being leads to death (Gyekye 1995: 86; Wiredu 1983: 120). The *okra* is believed to be eternal but is capable of reincarnating (Gyekye 1995: 98). The *sunsum* said to be the basis of one's personality and, like the *okra*, is believed to come from God. The *nipadua* is the material component of the person, and is perishable after death.

Gyekye's interpretation of the three components of a person has not been accepted by all Akan philosophers. Prominent among these objectors are Kwasi Wiredu and Safo Kwame. They reject Gyekye's position that the *okra* and *sunsum* are physical. According to these philosophers, the two entities are rather quasi-physical (Wiredu 1983: 120; Kwame 2004: 345-346). By this, they mean that the entities have near physical properties and cannot, therefore, be purely spiritual as claimed by Gyekye. Yet, Gyekye's position is affirmed by Ajei (2012: 191-192, 200) and Majeed (2013: 25-28). So far as the concept of a person, as discussed in this section, is concerned, what it is for one to be a person or what it takes to be a person is possessed by all human beings. So far as one is 'born of a human seed' (Menkiti 1984: 172), one is expected to possess them. In order to be described as a person in this sense, it is just adequate to be a human being. A person or a human being is referred to as *odasani* or *onipa* in Akan language.

The Concept of Personhood in Gyekye's philosophy

Personhood, according to Gyekye, is understood in moral terms in Akan philosophy.¹ He states that, someone is regarded as a 'person' if she has a disposition which is seen by the community as largely ethical.² Such a person is deemed to be a source of goodness to the community by way of the person's interactions or relationship with other members of the community, and her general choice of actions in life. While I share Gyekye's view, I also notice that a person is not expected to be morally perfect because a human being can only be fallible. In Akan language, it is often said *nfomso bata nipa ho* (the human being is prone to error). This, however, does not suggest that in Akan thought the human capacity to act immorally is solely attributed to bad judgement or ignorance. It does not mean at all, as taught by Socrates, that a person only does what she knows to be virtuous.³ What appears to be the case is that occasionally accidental factors (*akwanhyia*), moral complications or temptations at trying times (*nshwe*) and weakness of the will are believed to cause even the most upright of humans to act immorally. These nonetheless do not change the general opinion about any such human, as someone whose identity

¹ Gyekye 1992: 109-110. This view is shared by Dzobo (1992: 123-124) as well.

² This sort of person is also referred to as *onipa*. This means that the word *onipa* could be used for both the ontological and normative senses of the human person. Therefore, I will henceforth refer to the ontological as *onipa*₁ and the normative as *onipa*₂. In place of the former, I may also write *odasani*.

³ Plato, *Protagoras* 357e, 358c.

is determined on the high tendency which she has to act morally (rightly). This individual is practically a 'good person' (*nipa pa*). The moral foundation of personhood, to a large extent, links the individual with the community. For the one described as a 'person' does not act with total disregard for the well-being of the community. After all, at the human level, morality is not something that an individual alone can bring about without other humans. In other words, social relations are critical to the question of morality. This means that, to a large extent, and in support of Gyekye, personhood is achieved on the basis of how one relates to members of one's community.

The Concept of Community (and/or Communitarianism)

In current philosophical debates about the arrangement of the African community, a well-known expression, 'communitarianism', often comes up. Communitarianism is 'the doctrine that the group (that is, the society) constitutes the focus of the activities of the individual members of the society'.⁴ The African community, as will be shown shortly, is seen by many African thinkers to be communitarian, but some of the disagreements between Gyekye and other scholars have been about the extent to which this characterisation of the African social structure is accurate. African thought appears to present different perspectives on life and on both the universe and what it contains. Given this and the current situation in Africa where many of its educated citizens get introduced to Western conceptions of

⁴ Gyekye 1995: 155. This, however, does not mean that the concept of communitarianism only applies to the African society. Amitai Etzioni's work (1998) is a testament to this fact.

individual rights,⁵ there is the potential for divergence of interpretation on how the African social system ought to provide for or conceive of the notion of the common or community good (and how to achieve it). This is in spite of the fact that being members of a community, a people are presumed to share fundamental cultural traits and allegiances. The idea of a community may therefore be understood as ‘the idea of people living together as a group in a specific location and sharing some commonalities of history, ideology, belief system, values, lineage, kinship, or political system’(Ikuenobe 2006: 1). As a result of the aforementioned differences among Africa’s educated citizens and philosophers in particular, and the fact that they can each support their views with strong arguments suggest that the African (sense of) community cannot be simple.

By the word ‘community’ this paper intends ‘cultural community’. The general outlook of the African cultural community as conceived by African scholars must be understood with all its historical underpinnings. For instance, shortly after the official ending of the Cold War, the founding fathers of some African states such as Kaunda, Nkrumah, Nyerere and Senghor⁶

⁵ The notion of individual rights may not be absent from African thought, except that it would differ from such Western theories as libertarianism and liberalism (Majeed 2014: 109-111).

⁶ The following works fundamentally espoused the socialist ideals of the scholars: Kaunda (1971), Nkrumah (1964), Nyerere (1968) and Senghor (1964).

tilted toward socialism because, they thought, socialism was expressible in African terms, and that the social arrangement of the socialist state was consistent with, if not similar to, the African social structure. Mbiti and Menkiti also argued for the immensely social character of the African social set-up and for its ontological primacy over the individual (Mbiti 1989: 141; Menkiti 1984: 171-173). Nevertheless, the discussion of the concept took a major intellectual turn with Gyekye's theory of 'moderate communitarianism' (Gyekye 1995: 154-162) – a more elaborate exposition of which is nonetheless done in his *Tradition and Modernity*.⁷

Moderate communitarianism is the idea that although the African society is communitarian in character, it also grants some individuality and/or individual rights. And that African communitarianism is not, thus, unrestricted.⁸ Gyekye understood Mbiti and Menkiti as presenting what he called 'radical or unrestricted communitarianism' because of these scholars' failure to account for individual rights in the African social setting (Gyekye 1997: 52). Also, Mbiti's claim that 'the existence of the individual is the existence of the corporate' and is expressible by the individual (who is philosophically aware) as 'I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am' (1989: 141) is taken by Gyekye to imply that there is no expression of individuality in the

⁷ See particularly chapter 2 of this work which was published in 1997.

⁸ Some topics which are linked with the concept of communitarianism – such as 'person', 'identity', and Gyekye's own explanation of the meaning of communitarianism – are also discussed, although quite briefly, in Gyekye (1992: 101-122).

African community. Similarly, Menkiti's view that the community 'plays a crucial role in the individual's acquisition of personhood' (Menkiti 1984: 179) is understood by Gyekye to mean that 'personhood is fully defined by the community' (1997: 52). Gyekye moderates the influence of the community by citing, among others, the individual's 'capacity of choice' – as a result of her 'rationality' or 'moral sense' or 'capacity for virtue' (1997: 53).

Person and Community

In order to situate the idea of a person (*onipa₁*) within the context of community, or examine the possible links between them, it is crucial to make an important inference from the previous section: that while community could be understood as a metaphysical entity which may have individual humans as its physical instantiations, communitarianism could be said to be a philosophy or an orientation that demands some particular ways of behaviour from humans. Communitarianism could therefore be described as a call to action – and, specifically, a call to act morally.

On the basis of the preceding comment, it is not easy to identify a possible link between *onipa₁* and community (the general concern of the philosophy of communitarianism). For, *onipa₁* is just an embodied being who, at the metaphysical level, is also believed to have *okra* and *sunsum*. *Onipa₁* is simply a human being.⁹ And, determining what a human being may entail individuality, but the notion of community entails a collective of individuals. *Onipa₁* does not also readily reveal a connection

⁹ And, *onipa₁* is an identity which once gained, can never be lost. The human being is always a human being.

between it and the concept of communitarianism, since communitarianism is meant to influence a person to act morally while by '*onipa₁*' no direct reference is made to any morality quality; that is, it is not, for instance, an indication that one is being considered in moral terms or that one has acted morally.

However, there is evidence in the works of Gyekye that also suggest some level of morality in the concept of *onipa₁*. For instance, the human being is understood by him to possess *okra* and *sunsum* which, as stated above, are both divine and good. God, the source of these entities, is believed to be good by nature; and part of the meaning of the meaning of divine goodness is that God is morally good. [It is not the place of this article to go into the philosophical debates surrounding the goodness of God.] Yet there is the notion of *sunsum fi* (dirty spirit) or *sunsum bōne* (bad spirit) in contemporary Akan language. The word *sunsum* in Akan language has multiple meanings. While it refers to the spiritual constituent of the human being, it also refers to anything metaphysical, including non-human spirits. If a person is believed to be possessed by an evil spirit or is being used by such a spirit to perform grotty acts, *sunsum fi* or *sunsum bōne* is mentioned.¹⁰ But such a *sunsum* is in terms of origin mundane, not divine. It is therefore different from the divine constituent of a person (*odasani*) called *sunsum*.

The concept of *onipa₁* may as well not be successfully delinked from the notion of community for a number of reasons. In the first place, it is *onipa₁* who acts (whether in the interest of herself or the community). Secondly, *onipa₁* is part of the

¹⁰ This usage is very common among Akan converts to Christianity (Gyekye 1995: 88).

community. Thirdly, when, by the prescriptions of personhood, an individual acts morally and it is said to be in the interest of the community, some individual human beings (*onipa₁s*) will be the recipients of the goodness that come along with the action. Consequently, if *onipa₁* could act morally and be the objects of moral action, then, there is some sense in seeing her as a moral being. *Onipa₁* therefore has moral connections, just like personhood and communitarianism except that *onipa₁*, unlike personhood, is not a philosophy of action in itself (as in not being a call to act in a certain way).

Personhood and Community/Communitarianism

Mbiti and Menkiti's positions on personhood and community, as explained above, could be summarised as follows: that a person (*onipa₂*) has the tendency to act morally and has the general social good or the community's interest in mind. The community requires goodness of its members and the individual (*onipa₂*) provides that. This is one way in which personhood and community relate. Yet, the manner in which the community's demand ought to be respected is what has led Gyekye to describe Mbiti and Menkiti as 'radical' communitarians. However, Gyekye's positions on Mbiti and Menkiti are not easy to obtain. And this has, for instance, affected Martin Ajei's presentation of Gyekye's critique of Menkiti.

Ajei (2015: 497) states rightly that Gyekye regards Menkiti as a 'radical communitarian' (extreme communitarian). However, his suggestion that Gyekye regards Menkiti as such because of the latter's view that community, in the African social setting, 'defines the person as person ... and personhood is something which has to be achieved, and is not given simply because one is born of human

seed'¹¹ could be questioned. This questioning will be done not only on Ajei's interpretations but on difficulties existent in Gyekye's own arguments against Menkiti. In the first place, Gyekye, contrary to Ajei's understanding, sometimes affirms (but does not deny) that personhood must be attained, neither does he (Gyekye) deny that not everyone is deemed to be a person. In Akan culture, according to Gyekye, 'much is expected of a person in terms of the display of moral virtue. The pursuit or practice of moral virtue is held as intrinsic to the concept of a person' (1992: 109). Consequently, the Akan 'fully satisfied with, and profoundly appreciative of, the high standards of the morality of a person's conduct, would say of such a person: "he/she is real (human) person" (*ōye onipa paa*)' (1992: 109). This implies that since not all humans would succeed in exhibiting high standards of morality in order to be regarded as 'persons' or 'real human persons' – Gyekye suggests that personhood would not be attained by all.

This means that personhood is achievable, and that one does not attain this moral status just because one is a human being. Indeed, Gyekye admits that 'there are some expressions in Akan language, and judgements or evaluations made about the life and conduct of people, which give the impression that it is the community that defines and confers personhood' (1992: 108-109). And that in the Akan community, there are some 'basic norms and ideals' which 'the behaviour of a person, *if* he [sic] is a person

¹¹ Ajei takes this quote from Menkiti (1984: 172) and gives no other reason why Gyekye regards Menkiti as radical (Ajei 2015: 497).

ought to conform' to (Gyekye 1992: 109).¹² But the ultimate communal character of the ideals, norms and moral virtues is evident in the list of actions provided by Gyekye as follows: 'generosity, kindness, compassion, benevolence, respect and concern for others; in fine, any action or behaviour that conduces to the promotion of the welfare of others' (1992: 109).

What Gyekye rejects and regards as extreme is Menkiti's idea that the community 'fully defines or confers personhood' (1992: 111). Gyekye provides an additional interpretation of the moral conception of the person in Akan philosophy in opposition to Menkiti: that describing the human being as a person (*onipa*₂), he 'is considered to possess an innate capacity for virtue, for performing morally right actions ...' (1992: 109). But, Gyekye interestingly notes '[m]oral capacities as such cannot be said to be implanted by or catered for or conferred by the community' (1992: 111). Gyekye allows the community a partial role in a person's moral life, as in 'moral instruction, advice, admonition and the imposition of sanctions' (1992: 111). This move of Gyekye's is partly an attempt to minimise the force or implications of the communal requirement of conformity to accepted moral values (which he has committed to in the preceding paragraph). He foresees rightly that by maintaining the argument in the preceding paragraph, it would be difficult to reject Menkiti's version of communitarianism.

For, if observance of moral standards and communal values guarantees personhood, and the community does enforce this and

¹² Gyekye again suggests that in judging whether or not an individual's conduct is bad, one also admits that moral virtues exist which the individual is capable of exhibiting (1992: 109).

determine which individuals are achieving this, then, somehow, the community would be *the* determinant of personhood. He therefore adds to the communal element the individual's ability to 'execute' her own 'life style and projects' – largely due to her rationality¹³ – to constitute the determinants of personhood (1992: 111-112). However, Gyekye's presentation of the innate dimension of personhood is quite ambiguous.¹⁴ He sets out to present it in opposition to the 'processual' acquisition of moral personhood implicit in the idea of communal conferment of personhood. That, 'A human person is a person whatever his age or social status. Personhood may reach its full realization in community, but it is not acquired or yet to be achieved as one goes along in society' (1992: 108).

As a result, he regards as 'misguided' Menkiti's distinction between the African and Western conceptions of personhood whereby the former is described as 'processual' or 'some sort of ontological progression' and the latter as based on 'some isolated static quality' (1992: 108). Yet, Gyekye's conception of personhood here is inconsistent with that which is in the second paragraph preceding the current one since that conception is

¹³ He understands rationality to encompass 'capacity for moral virtue' and 'capacity choice', and, thus, takes all these to be innate (1992: 111-112).

¹⁴ In this paragraph and the next, I explain how this ambiguity negatively affects Gyekye's own arguments on personhood and (moderate) communitarianism.

processual¹⁵ and acquired. It is only when the innate conception is considered as complementary, but not opposed, to Menkiti's 'processual' view that it could be helpful to Gyekye's argument. But if the preceding statement is reasonable, then, it would be quite incorrect to describe Menkiti's usage of 'processual' in the African context as misguided. There are also problems with aspects of the innate argument itself.

First, Gyekye regards the innate dimension as a given, yet it reaches 'its full actualization in community'. While he seeks to make this dimension stable or static, it is difficult to understand how personhood, conceived this way, could begin to actualise and culminate in 'full actualisation' without entailing a process. But if it entails a process, then, it is not static as Gyekye supposes. Secondly, while a person is deemed in Akan philosophy to possess reason, it is not the case that possession of reason is necessarily a determinant of personhood. Reason is a quality associated with human beings (*'nipa*₁ or *adasa* [plural of *odasani*]), as distinguished from non-human beings. Thus, the human being, being rational, would have the capacity to think about moral and non-moral issues and to choose moral and non-moral actions. However, she becomes a person when she *actually* chooses and

¹⁵ By 'processual' I do not intend Menkiti's view that the older an individual gets the more of a person he becomes (1984: 173). I have in mind its attendant presupposition that moving from the status of a human being to the acquisition of personhood entails some process or dynamism.

performs moral actions in the community.¹⁶ Consequently, the ability to use reason to execute one's 'life goals and projects' does not necessarily make one a *real* person as such, unless those goals and projects are moral or further communal good. The aspect of Gyekye's individualistic criterion of personhood which I would endorse for inclusion in moderate communitarianism is that the individual is accorded some rights in the Akan community, and is not always subject to the will of the latter.

In my view, the prospect of moderate communitarian morality, in terms of personhood, still lies in communal moral expectations regarding the common good and the upholding of moral standards. It does not lie within the region of moral capacity. In this context, an individual is deemed to be a 'person' (*onipa*) when she, for instance, commits to moral actions and to the promotion of the well-being of the community. This sense of personhood is dynamic and distinguishable from the static sense of the moral person which is what Gyekye's discussion of the normative conception of the person partially drifts to. The static sense is the view that personhood is merely a capacity for moral action (which is always possessed by a human being even if she has not acted) and cannot be achieved in future (since the human being already has it). But, if all humans already possess the capacity for moral action – since they are already persons – what will be the intellectual and pragmatic use in seeking to offer this conception of personhood as a communitarian ethical theory? Indeed, it cannot be a basis for human ethical choices in the

¹⁶ In Akan ethics, and not necessarily in Akan communitarian philosophy, one is also required to see any human being living anywhere as worthy of moral treatment.

community because one cannot choose not to be a person, neither can it be affirmed or denied that it leads humans to make ethical choices. The only sense of personhood, therefore, that confirms without contradictions the moral foundations of communitarianism and also has practical ethical value is the dynamic sense.

And there is evidence that Gyekye has in his *Tradition and Modernity* attempted to deal with some of the problems identified above. He now relocates the normative demands on the individual – which leads her to the status of personhood – in the proper context of community and social ethics. He affirms, contrary to his position above, that personhood is not ‘innate’ but is earned in the ‘moral arena’ (1997: 50-51) – a clear indication, once again, that personhood is achievable. And, that all humans, including children who have not stepped into the moral arena, are only capable of moral choice but are not necessarily persons yet (1997: pp. 50-51). But Gyekye continues to maintain the problematic position that rational, and for that matter moral, capacity is a determinant of personhood since it helps the individual to ‘form and execute’ her personal ‘goals and plans’ (1997: p. 53). This notwithstanding, he emphasises the social orientation of communitarian ethics:

[T]he communitarian doctrine, to repeat, is essentially a socioethical doctrine ... It is a doctrine about social relations as well as moral attitudes: about what sorts of relationships should hold between individuals in society, and about the need to take into account the interests of the wider society not only in designing sociopolitical institutions and in evolving behaviour patterns for individuals in their responses to the needs and welfare of other members of the society (1997: 149).

On this social outlook of communitarianism, Gyekye's view, when juxtaposed with that of Menkiti would reveal the common position that the African community requires ethical behaviour of its members, for their collective betterment. Both philosophers are, in this sense, communitarians; except that Gyekye allows for some level of individual rights (including the right to own property and engage in private enterprise [1997: 149-157]) and that individuals are sometimes portrayed in proverbs as responsible for their 'situations in life' (2004: 57). However, given Gyekye's multiple and mixed responses to Menkiti, and the very fact that Gyekye acknowledges aspects of Akan culture that suggest communal conferment of personhood, it is always going to be difficult for anyone, not just Ajei, to present a unitary position as Gyekye's – especially, in terms of personhood.

Another way in which personhood relates to communitarianism is that an individual who wants to be described as a communitarian or as having attained the status of personhood can only succeed through action. The way a person (*onipa*₂) acts grants her these. Moreover, as a philosophy of action, communitarianism and personhood appear to be tied together in quality and direction. The quality (the goodness or badness) of one's actions determines if one is or is not respecting the tenets of communitarianism; and the direction which the requirements of both personhood and communitarianism lead an individual is the same – that is, morality and communal good. Finally, both personhood and communitarian orientation could be acquired and lost in the course of the life of an individual. All this shows a more direct link between personhood and communitarianism, as compared with the link between the concept of a person (*onipa*₁) and communitarianism.

Conclusion

The concepts of ‘person’, personhood and the communitarianism are not in African philosophy the same. However, there are series of complex connections between them. This complexity renders significant a paper such as this which provides a clarification of those connections in order to help understand them. Gyekye originated the concept of moderate communitarianism, a concept which largely entails these connections and the complexities in which have the tendency to lead to the misunderstanding of Gyekye’s position(s) or, at least, make it difficult for him to be understood. Ajei faced this difficulty. This article therefore contributes to the debate on person (*onipa₁* and *onipa₂*) and community.

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