

A critical exploration of the ideas of person and community in traditional Zulu thought.

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Declaration of academic integrity

I hereby declare that the composition of this dissertation entitled: “A critical exploration of the ideas of person and community in traditional Zulu thought” is my own work and that the dissertation has not been submitted at any other university and where other authors in this dissertation have been either quoted or paraphrased, this has been thoroughly referenced.

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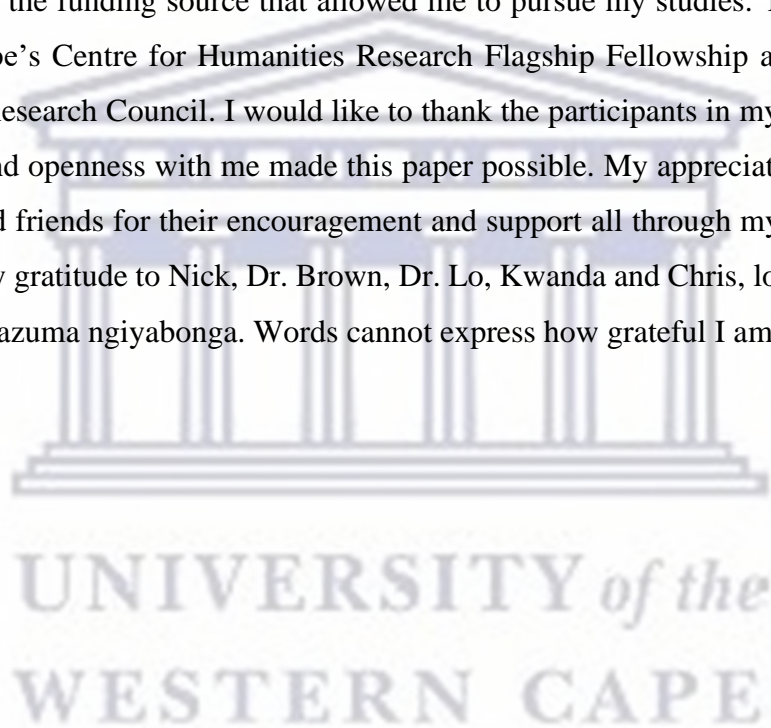
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## Abstract

The issue of personhood has long been of concern to many philosophers. The primary concern has been about determining the necessary and sufficient conditions for an entity to be a person at a particular point in time. The most common answer in Western terms is that to be a person at a time is to have certain special mental properties such as psychological connectedness. On the other hand, others argue that we can only ever understand the ascription of mental characteristics as part of a necessarily joint set of physically instantiated properties. Most recent contributions to the topic have however cast doubt on these earlier attempts to understand personhood solely in terms of bodily and psychological features. Not only do they suggest a model of personhood that is individualistic, they also fail to make reference to communal and social elements. In particular, many non-Western, specifically African, cultures foreground these communal and social aspects. This is true of the Akan, Yoruba and Igbo cultures. As Kwasi Wiredu and Kwame Gyekye; Dismas Masolo; Segun Gbadegesin; and Ifeanyi Menkiti have shown respectively. However, there is a lack of comparable philosophical inquiry in the Southern African context. The primary aim of this study is to critically explore the metaphysical, cultural, linguistic and normative resources of the Zulu people in understanding what it means to be a person. The approach is predominantly conceptual and analytic, but it also draws on some empirical data with a view to extending the results of the literature-based study. Not only does this extend the field of cultural inquiry to personhood, it also opens up new opportunities to tackle old problems in the debate, including the question of what should be the proper relationship between the individual and the community. Specifically, I argue that rather than focus attention on the priority of the individual or community in relation to each other, consideration of the notion of personhood in Zulu culture reveals that notwithstanding significant communal constraints forms of agency are available to individuals.

## 1. Introduction

One of the pressing issues in the contemporary debate of personhood in African philosophy is the difficulty of the relationship between the community and the individual. There is widespread agreement to the fact that personhood in African thinking ought to be understood as an activity that is socially sanctioned as opposed to abstractions. For instance, Menkiti (1984) sees personhood as something that is earned in the dynamic relationship between the individual and the community. Gyekye (1997) points out that this view, however, fails to give adequate recognition to the individual's creativity and inventiveness, and it also fails to give individuals due regard for their human rights. Accordingly, Gyekye (1997) argues that "the most satisfactory way to recognize the claims of both communality and individuality is to ascribe to them the status of an equal moral standing" (p. 41). Problems arise, however, when the community and individual are in conflict. Thus, the real problem in contemporary African philosophical debates on personhood concerns how to negotiate and resolve the relationship between the community and the individual. My task in this study is two-fold. First, to articulate a Zulu conception of personhood. Second, to show that agency is a crucial part of thinking about personhood in the Zulu tradition and that the exercise of agency is central to negotiating and resolving the relationship between individual and community.

In the history of the discourse on the subject of the self and personhood, conflicting viewpoints have arisen understandably. But, as we shall see, the perspective taken in this study will foreground the social aspects. The Zulu conception of personhood that I put forward stresses the role of communal and normative features. Indeed, the view that social aspects are important is now being emphasised in discourses that previously did not emphasise on them. Let me explain.

Specifically in the Western tradition, there is an abundance of arguments and counter-arguments regarding the question of personhood. For several centuries, the dominant trend in the literature on personhood has centered on these Western individualistic theories, which hinge on metaphysical assumptions about the self. The most common answer in Western terms is that to be a person is to have certain special mental properties, such as memory, first-person perspective, and psychological connectedness<sup>1</sup>. On the other hand, others argue that we can

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<sup>1</sup> See Locke (1975); Derek Parfit (1971, 1984, 2012); David Shoemaker (1984, 1997, 1999, 2008, 2011); Noonan (2003).

only ever understand the ascription of mental characteristics as part of a necessarily joint set of physically instantiated properties, (e.g., the continuing brain), hence, they emphasize the necessary human component of personhood<sup>2</sup>. Most recent contributions to the topic have, however, cast doubt on these earlier attempts to understand personhood solely in terms of bodily and psychological features. Not only do they suggest a model of personhood that is individualistic, they also fail to refer to communal and social elements.

For several centuries, the dominant trend in the literature on personhood has been the Western individualistic theories. For instance, in the Western tradition John Locke's account of persons advocates for mental property such as, self-consciousness to be essential to personhood. On Locke's (1975) view, a person is "an thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing in different times and places; which it does only by that consciousness, which is inseparable from thinking, and as it seems to me essential to it..." (p. 335). A person for Locke is thus the kind of entity that can think self-reflectively, and think of itself as persisting over time. Locke additionally asserts that persons are not just thinking intelligent beings that can reason and reflect, but also entities that can be held accountable for their actions. However, others have emphasized bodily features, arguing that personhood cannot be defined purely in terms of psychological features.

The biggest mistake made by both the mental and the bodily approaches is that they are individualist. Both the mental and physical approaches on personhood typically pick out isolated atomic, mental, physical, and psychological features where one's identity is independent of the normative and cultural structures of community and relationships with others that define and sustain personhood (Barnes, 2016). It is problematic to say that there is nothing really more to personhood and personal identity beyond these mental and bodily features. Psychological features and physical features are grounded on more basic facts, cultural settings and social relations and they need to be seen within a context that can provide their full significance (Adeofe, 2004). Thus, one cannot just isolate these psychological and physical features and make them a criterion for personhood as this leads to one providing an erroneous relationship between the individual and the social world. Consequently, the personhood debate has shifted from individualist approaches to social ones.

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<sup>2</sup> See Lynne Rudder Baker (2000), Peter Frederick Strawson, (1959), Eric Olson (1997).

More recently, the thought that personhood and personal identity consists in something more than merely bodily and psychological features has been given prominence in the work of contemporary Western philosopher Marya Schechtman. In particular, she says to be a person is in part to exist in a cultural and social infrastructure that can support the lives of persons and to take part in specific kinds of shared activities. For Schechtman (2014), being a person is to have a place in person-space, which involves being seen as a person by others.

Schechtman (2014) suggests that person-life should be seen as a cluster concept. It is a cluster of biological, psychological, and social functions which work together. First, there are the attributes of the individual—the physical and psychological capacities that she possesses. Over and above having certain biological and psychological features, being a person is also a matter of fitting into a social structure in particular ways (Schechtman, 2010). Beyond physical and psychological development one's life involves an array of complex and sophisticated interactions with other persons. This view takes into consideration that a person-life is a life lived in a culture and in interaction with other persons and these basic relations influence a person's life. Accordingly, "to be a person is to be engaged in certain kinds of characteristic interactions with other persons—to take up a place in what I will call person-space" (Schechtman, 2014, p. 113). The third part is what Schechtman calls the social and cultural infrastructure of personhood. It involves the set of practices and institutions that provides the backdrop within which the kinds of activities that make up the form of life of personhood become possible. Thus, "a person-life is composed of these three interconnected parts: individual capacities, activities and interactions, and social infrastructures" (Schechtman, 2014, p. 115).

Schechtman is not alone in making such claims: Atkins and Mackenzie (2013) also argue that personhood is generated from both an internal and an external perspective, and consists of relationships, moral duties, roles, relationships and commitments that matter most about a person. This is to say that many aspects of one's personhood are not matters of choice but arise from practical constraints that define one's situation and the involuntary aspects of one's identity, such as one's individual bodily and intellectual capacities, one's sexual, racial, linguistic and cultural or ethnic identity, one's family relationships (Atkins, and Mackenzie, 2013). Accordingly, it is through our relationships that our human selves are made (Lindeman, 2016).



Despite having advantages of practical considerations, what Schechtman's Person Life View (PLV) qualifies as a person seems arbitrary. Schechtman's notion of person, involves being seen and treated as a person by others, seems to be worrisome and present difficulties for her account. Simply because this seems to make the view objectionably conventionalist, allowing anyone (or anything) to be either made a person (or not) just by the way we treat it, an implication that is problematic. Imagine, for example, a mannequin placed in a department store entrance, dressed to look like a person greeting customers (Wagner, 2015). Obviously, this is not a person, but it certainly could be accorded a place in person-space: people might wave to it, hold the door for it, move out of its way (Beck, 2013). This is to say, society can mistakenly believe this is a person and treat the mannequin as a person. Further, although Schechtman's view purports to be social, it appears to lean strongly towards the individualistic aspects. Moreover, it claims incorrectly that its propositions regarding personhood are universal (Beck and Oyowe, 2018). More specifically, when looking at the cases of transplant, Schechtman (2014) argues that "for PLV, the continuation of the same person just consists in the fact that the person before us now is viewed as and treated as the same locus of practical concerns as the person who entered surgery for cerebrum extraction" (p. 152). This commitment, however, is not plausible simply because her social criterion is not always reliable (Beck, 2015). Consequently, the view is plagued by important challenges.

Even so, the growing shift in the Western discourse is significant because it confirms what has always been emphasised in the African debates. This is precisely what many non-Western cultures emphasise—i.e., communal and social aspects. This is true of the Akan, Luo, Yoruba and Igbo cultures, as Kwasi Wiredu and Kwame Gyekye; Dismas Masolo; Segun Gbadegesin; and Ifeanyi Menkiti have shown respectively. Considering the fact that Western approaches fail to provide a viable relationship between the individual and the community, it seems only fitting to shift to the work of contemporary African philosophers who have given prominence to the thought that personhood and personal identity consists in something more than merely bodily and psychological features. It is to the contributions of these philosophers I now turn.

My aim is to extend the efforts of these African philosophers. To this end, I note three issues. First, in sub-Saharan Africa, South Africa has been underrepresented in the discussion on

personhood. Thus, the proposed Zulu account gleaned from the idea Ubuntu<sup>3</sup> can be seen as the Southern African contribution to the personhood debate. And, as I shall argue, it will also open up new opportunities to tackle old problems in the personhood debate, including the question of what should be the proper relationship between the individual and the community. Second, being a person does not mean the same thing for all people in sub-Saharan Africa (Matolino and Kwindigwi, 2013). There are important differences in Akan, Luo, Yoruba and Igbo understanding of personhood. One way to view my attempt, then, is as an effort to extend the field of cultural inquiry to personhood. In this way, a Zulu account of personhood centred on mutual recognition can be seen as an important addition along with the Akan, Luo, Yoruba and Igbo alternatives. Lastly, exploring the metaphysical dimension of Ubuntu focusing on specific aspects of it which are mutual recognition and *hlonipha*, especially as it relates to personhood, can potentially provide alternative ways to think about personhood.

### **1.1. Aims of the study**

In the next chapter, I shall begin to set out the views of personhood prominent in the African debates. For now, I want to articulate the research problem and objectives of this study. There are two main aims.

First, this study aims to address the absence of Southern African approaches (specifically, Zulu) in the African discourse of personhood. It does so by exploring the metaphysical dimension of the idea of Ubuntu. To the extent that I succeed, I would have extended the discourse by adding to the culture-specific approaches that are already well-known in the literature, e.g., the Akan, Luo, Yoruba and Igbo approaches. Second, keep in mind that the debate is still on the question and difficulty of the relationship between the community and the individual. The radical communitarian idea of personhood takes the community to be prior in the conceptualization of personhood. Consequently, it faces several problems such as, "misrepresenting the relationship by crowding out the individual, including her autonomy and freedom" (Gyekye, 1997, p. 37). Similarly, one must not be persuaded by Gyekye's moderate account, which, as some have pointed out, unsuccessfully establishes a relation of equality between two mutually exclusive theses.

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<sup>3</sup>I focus on the value of mutual recognition and the value of *hlonipha* (respect) — *hlonipha* involves treating others in morally acceptable ways.

Accordingly, the fundamental question hence still remains, what, then, is the appropriate way to approach the debate on the relationship between individual and community? The second primary aim of this study is to show how the Zulu conception points us to the notion of agency as it is a crucial part of thinking about personhood and how it can illuminate the relationship between individual and community.

## **1.2. Methodology**

The study consisted of a literature-based analysis as well as a qualitative component consisting of interviews with key informants. These semi-structured interviews served as a way of confirming and extending the results of the literature study. This approach which subscribes to interviews, discussion and dialogue is known as the conversation method in African philosophy and is traced back to Kenyan Philosopher Odera Oruka (1983). The method attempts to document and articulate the views of indigenous African individuals reputed for their exceptional wisdom and independent critical musings, with the aim of presenting such ideas as authentic African philosophy (Oruka,1991).

### **1.2.1. Data collection**

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, that is, through conversations with key informants. The paper focused primarily on the analysis of 4 interviews conducted with individuals from the urban area of KwaMashu, Northern Durban. The following data collection and techniques of the method were used.

### **1.2.2. Semi-structured interviews**

In this research, semi-structured interviews are seen as the richest and most useful option to collect data. Open-ended questions were used in these interviews because this form of question is recommended in an exploratory qualitative inquiry. Open-ended questions are more narrative orientated than in a statistical approach and they are also recommended because they allow a natural or a relaxed setting or environment. In addition, the open-ended questions do not restrict the responses of the participant (Courage and Baxter, 2005). They enable him/her to give as much information as possible.

### **1.2.3. Sample selection**

This study sought key informants in the form of Zulu elders who are in their pension age and who are regarded as experts in the relevant language and culture in the community. Purposive sampling and snowballing was used. The purposive sampling technique, also called judgment sampling, is the deliberate choice of a participant due to the qualities the participant possesses (Cresswell and Plano Clark, 2011). For this study, pensioners, grandmothers and grandfathers of ages 65 years and upwards are chosen. Zulu people view elders as a source of wisdom and knowledge and they are generally revered for their status. This is to say, these individuals are well informed concerning the phenomenon of interest.

The study also made use of snowball sampling which Tongco, (2007) defines as a sampling method in which one interviewee gives the researcher the name of at least one more potential interviewee. That interviewee, in turn, provides the name of at least one more potential interviewee, and so on, with the sample growing like a rolling snowball if more than one referral per interviewee is provided (Kirchherr and Charles, 2018). Therefore, where necessary the researcher used past ties and communication with prior research subjects in order to gain access to potential new subjects. 65 year and older pensioners referred the researcher to the additional subjects. This data was collected in KwaMashu, in KwaZulu-Natal.

### **1.3. Looking forward: summary of chapters**

In chapter two I examine the various ways in which the concept of personhood is articulated in African thinking. I seek to present the debate between metaphysical and the normative conceptions of personhood. In introducing the metaphysical conception, I look at two Ghanaian born thinkers, Kwame Gyekye and Kwasi Wiredu, both of whom have written extensively on the Akan conception of personhood. I also look at the Yoruba metaphysical conception as presented in the work of Segun Gbadegesin. In the normative conception I shall focus on Menkiti and Ikuenobe. I also discuss the main issues raised by normative as well as metaphysical conceptions of personhood, while raising objections and responses. Through this critical engagement with these conceptions, I aim to argue in favour of the normative view. Two crucial arguments stand out in this chapter. First, the normative view does not discard non-communal aspects of self. In fact, one's metaphysical, psychological capacities are a foundation for the normative view. Second, one cannot advocate a complete separation between the metaphysics of community and the metaphysics of persons simply because these conceptions are related and not mutually exclusive as Matolino assumes.

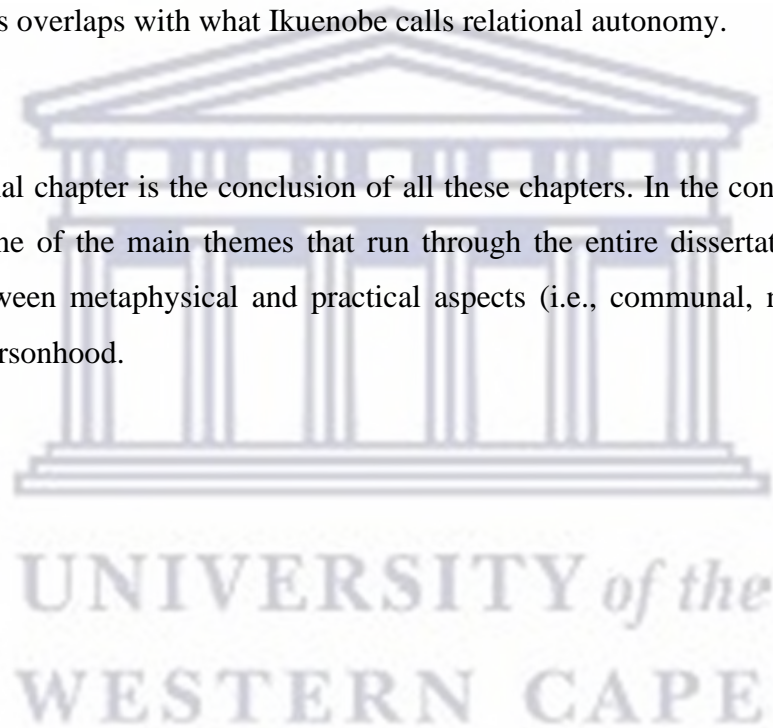
The primary aim of chapter three is to critically explore the cultural, linguistic and normative resources of the Zulu people in understanding what it means to be a person. The exploration is premised on the idea that the concept of personhood is a thick concept with both descriptive and normative components and that both components are essential for understanding personhood (Ikuenobe, 2019). Through a brief overview of Zulu history and tradition and by synthesizing the empirical data collected during the course of this study, this chapter aims to investigate and articulate the Zulu conception of personhood.

In this chapter, I want to show that what we see in the literature as the dominant view of personhood somehow overlaps with the Zulu cultural understanding of personhood. In addition, I set out the Zulu normative account under three broad themes namely, mutual recognition in the custom of *hlonipha*; mutual recognition through relationality, including the virtues of helping and caring; and carrying out social responsibilities. The data collected will be central to the chapter, this data shows that traditionally Zulu people held a conception of personhood that aligns more closely with the normative conception of personhood than with the purely metaphysical view. In this chapter I argue that personhood is a social category —the metaphysical approach is not sufficient to explain personhood in the Zulu context given the data I have gathered. More specifically, I argue that both conceptions (the descriptive and normative) are interwoven, and they are both necessary to understand who we are as persons. Accordingly, one of the major strategies informing the present Zulu conception is that it appreciates the dual features of the idea of personhood, namely, the metaphysical and normative features.

In chapter four I go on to explore the question of the relationship between individual and community. I sketch out Menkiti's and Gyekye's views of the relationship between individual and community, emphasising how it informs their conception of personhood. I then draw attention to some tensions these accounts face. My contribution and exploration is premised on the idea that rather than focusing on the priority of the community or the individuality, contemporary experiences point to various practical strategies through which individuality can be expressed even within a constraining environment. I argue that it is not helpful to talk about the community or the individual overriding the other, these two extreme positions are just too complicated and not helpful. Rather it is more helpful to focus on certain internal resources such as rationality, agency and reflection of the agent that allows her to navigate through the

social world. Using empirical data I focus on contemporary experiences within the Zulu context, e.g., *ukuthwasa* and *ilobolo*, that might constrain the autonomy of individuals and then examine how certain attributes of agents enable them to negotiate these relational and social constraints. Drawing on empirical findings, I argue that in spite of these constraints contemporary strategies seem to exist for the expression of individuality. I argue that one is negotiating such that they (the community and the individual) meet halfway and find common ground. Accordingly, argue that it is not a matter of the community taking precedence over the individual as Menkiti implies. Moreover, it is certainly not the case that the individual overrides the community. My empirical findings indicated very strongly that we can think of the relationship more as dialogical. Finally, an attempt is made to sketch how my discussion with these participants overlaps with what Ikuenobe calls relational autonomy.

The fifth and final chapter is the conclusion of all these chapters. In the concluding chapter I point out that one of the main themes that run through the entire dissertation concerns the relationship between metaphysical and practical aspects (i.e., communal, normative, socio-moral etc.) of personhood.



## **2. The Conceptions of Personhood in African Philosophy**

Various thinkers have adopted irreconcilable differences in articulating the concept of personhood in African thinking. This has led to the rise of different schools of thought that defend their particular view at the exclusion of others. Each school of thought claims to represent the authentic African view of a person. However, "within each school of thought there is no absolute agreement on what constitutes person" (Matolino, 2011, p. 23). According to Ikuenobe, there are two philosophical conceptions of personhood in African thought: the descriptive metaphysical and the normative. A metaphysical account of personhood seeks to analyse the features and ontological make-up of an individual, examining, for instance, whether he or she is essentially material or immaterial, or whether he or she has one or two essential natures. For instance, the metaphysical analysis of the nature of the mind and body, and the relationship between them involves a descriptive account of personhood. On the metaphysical view, personhood is not based on an intragroup moral and social recognition. The idea is that social and moral commitments are not essential features of a person and cannot be said to be defining features of personhood (Ikuenobe, 2015). There are no normative standards of communal recognition that indicate a view of personhood.

Yet, Ikuenobe (2006) observes that "it is the normative and not the metaphysical idea of personhood that is germane to African communal traditions" (p. 117). Wiredu (2009) also notes that "This normative self-conception is, naturally, uppermost' or 'more dominant' in the African tradition than the ontological one" (p. 17). Part of my aim in this Chapter is to focus on the normative view of a person, which Ikuenobe and Wiredu take to be germane and more dominant.

It is worth noting that Matolino disagrees with Ikuenobe's taxonomy of positions: with Matolino drawing a line between metaphysical and communitarian approaches. By metaphysical, Matolino (2014) means those conceptions that are "free of communal considerations as primary constituents of the nature of persons and by communitarian he refers to all those conceptions that require for personhood communal participation and the performance of certain roles and obligations" (p. 32). I follow Wiredu's and Ikuenobe's classification, drawing the line instead between metaphysical and normative. This is because Matolino's way of carving up the literature on personhood invites problems of its own. As will be shown in one of the coming sections of this chapter.

The normative view expresses personhood in terms of communal relations and moral obligations. That is, the normative view specifies moral standards to which people must conform: personhood is presented as a social concept that is attained through meeting certain rules and standards set by the community. Accordingly, the notion of a person includes the idea of excellence and maturation. A person is a human being with a developed degree of psychological sophistication "who fully participates in social life and exhibits, in behaviour, appreciation of the relevant moral and social rules" (Oyowe, 2018, p. 2). That is, a person is not only defined in terms of intrinsic properties but also in terms of extrinsic properties (Ifeanyi Menkiti 1984, 2004; Polycarp Ikuenobe, 2006, 2018a).

Ultimately, in this chapter I examine the various ways in which the concept of personhood is articulated in African thinking. I seek to present the debate between metaphysical and the normative conceptions of personhood. In introducing the metaphysical conception, I look at two Ghanaian born thinkers, Kwame Gyekye and Kwasi Wiredu, both of whom have written extensively on the Akan conception of personhood. Also, look at the Yoruba metaphysical conception as presented in the work of Segun Gbadegesin. In the normative conception, I shall focus on Menkiti and Ikuenobe. I also discuss the main issues raised by normative as well as metaphysical followed by objections and responses. Through this critical engagement with these conceptions, rather than pit both views against each other, I aim to argue that the metaphysical and the normative view complement each other: one is necessary for the other.

### **2.1. Metaphysical accounts: Wiredu, Gyekye and Gbadegesin**

On the Akan metaphysical concept of person, both thinkers agree that for the Akan a person is composed of three fundamental elements: *okra* (which can be understood as the life-giving entity of a living organism), *sunsum* (the character, or "that which is responsible for the unique personal presence that an individual has"), and *honam* (the body of the organism) (Wiredu, 1992, p. 112).

Both thinkers take the *okra* to be an essential part of the human being that functions (among other things) to explain the difference between living and non-living beings. To use Kwasi Wiredu's expression, it is the "life principle". It has its origin in the Supreme Being, God, and it is therefore part of the divine in the human being. The presence of this divine essence in a human being may have been the basis of the Akan proverb, "All men are the children of God,



no one is the child of the earth" (Gyekye, 1987, p. 85). The *okra* is believed to also bear the destiny of the human being (Gyekye, 1995; Wiredu, 1983). However, for both thinkers the term unfolds in different ways, which is to say that Wiredu and Gyekye differ on the ontology of the *okra*. Gyekye (1995) holds that the *okra* is similar to a soul, as it is commonly understood in Western thinking. Hence, it is correct to translate *okra* into English as soul" (Gyekye, 1987, p. 85). On the other hand, Wiredu cautions us not to link the *okra* too closely with Western conceptions. It cannot be translated as soul on the grounds that in Western philosophy this term refers to a purely immaterial entity that somehow inhabits the body (Wiredu, 1987). The *okra*, by contrast, is quasi-physical. It is not, of course, supposed to be straightforwardly physical, as it is believed not to be fully subject to spatial constraints. Nor is it perceivable by the naked eye. Nevertheless, "in some ways it seems to be credited with para-physical properties" (Wiredu, 1987, p. 161). Wiredu insists upon drawing a somewhat more subtle distinction between these concepts. Though philosophically interesting, this dispute is beyond the scope of this chapter.

The second component of a person in Akan thought is *sunsum*. The *sunsum* is defined as personality, "a set of characteristics as evidenced in a person's behaviour – thoughts, feelings, actions, etc." (Gyekye, 1995, p. 91). This is described by various scholars as "that which is responsible for the total effect communicated by an 'individual's personality'" (Wiredu, 1987, p. 162). For Gyekye (1995), the *sunsum* "cannot be a physical thing, for qualities like courage, jealousy, gentleness, forcefulness, and dignity are psychological, not sensible or physical" (p. 90). Gyekye further points out that, like the *okra*, because the *sunsum* is a nonphysical component it is a spiritual element, it must be derived from the Supreme Being. Wiredu rejects Gyekye's position that the *okra* and *sunsum* are nonphysical. Wiredu and Gyekye also disagree on where *sunsum* comes from. Wiredu states it comes from the father, while Gyekye believes the Akan think it comes from the Supreme Being. Gyekye claims that the *sunsum* is immaterial, divine, and immortal, whereas Wiredu doubts these characterizations. According to Wiredu (1983), the two entities are rather quasi-physical. By this, he means that the entities have near physical properties and cannot, therefore, be purely spiritual as claimed by Gyekye. On a critical note, let me say that it is not always clear what Wiredu means by quasi-physical since he only primarily defines it in terms of what it is not namely that it is not purely spiritual. However, what exactly are such things? How might a thing be near physical? With no clear answers to these questions, the idea of quasi-physical does not shed light on the nature of these ontological units.

The third component of a person in Akan thought is *honam or nipadua* (body), which is the flesh, bones, and blood of which humans are made at the material level. The *nipadua* is the material component of the person and is perishable after death. Gyekye holds that *okra* and *sunsum* together make up the spiritual (nonphysical) part of the person, and the body is the physical substance it relates to.

In sum, all three ontological units constitute a person in Akan thought. We now turn attention to the idea of personhood in Yoruba traditional culture as presented by Segun Gbadegesin.<sup>4</sup>

Gbadegesin (1991) says the structural components of the *eniyan* (person) in the Yoruba culture are essentially three, and he characterizes them thus: *ara, okan, emi, ori*. Another characteristic which Gbadegesin explains is the *okan*, I prefer not to list it as a separate constituent of person – it as (an important) part of the *ara*. Gbadegesin (1991) posits that the "*ara* (body) is the physical component of the person and is described in physical terms such as heavy, strong or light strong or weak, hot or cold" (p. 149). The body houses senses, and it enables the person to be acquainted with the external world. He says internal organs are also taken as having some importance in the functioning of the person. For instance, the intestine plays a role in the physical strength of a person. Controlling the *ara* is the physical head called *ori*. However, he says, in the thinking of the Yoruba it is quite clear to them that there is more to a person than her mere physical body.

To see why that is the case, consider another element of *eniyan* is *okan* (heart). In Yoruba language, it appears to have a dual character. On the one hand, claims Gbadegesin (1998), "*Okan* is acknowledged as the physical organ responsible for the circulation of blood" (p. 150). Alternatively, as Oyeshile (2006) puts it, at the physical level, the heart is part of *ara* (body) and it is responsible for the pumping of blood to other parts of the body. On the other hand, Gbadegesin argues that *okan* is not just a physical heart that can be seen as performing some mental and psychic functions, but there is a nonphysical *okan*, invisible *okan* which is responsible for all forms of conscious identity. That is, the *okan* is also conceived as "the source of emotional and psychic reactions" (Gbadegesin, 1998, p. 150). Oladipo (1992) agrees with Gbadegesin that *okan* has a vital role to play as a seat of thought or consciousness in determining

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<sup>4</sup> For another authoritative account of personhood in Yoruba thought, see Leke Adeofe 2004.

part of human personality in Yoruba thought. Great emphasis is placed on the *okan* because it is believed that it controls the emotions and actions of a person. In this regard, when one is a brave person, the Yorubas say that *oni okan* (has a heart) and when one is *ofa* or coward or timid person that *koni okan* (he has no heart). We can also encourage a person by *kilo kan* (to strengthen his heart). It is the material heart that constitutes a real representation of another *okan*, which is essentially immaterial and invisible (Oyeshile, 2006).

The third characteristic that Gbadegesin (1991) looks at is *emi*, which is "construed as the active principle of life, and the life-giving element put in place by the deity" (p. 33). In a way that recalls Gyekye's position on the *sunsum* and *okra*, Gbadegesin holds that the *emi* is nonphysical. It is also construed as part of the divine "breath". Gbadegesin says that the *emi* is spiritual and has an independent existence. He argues that the *emi* is spiritual because its source, the deity, is spiritual. He also claims that it is independent because its source is also independent. *Emi*, as the active element of life, is an element common to all humans; it motivates the body by providing existence and guarantees consciousness if it remains in force. That is, it is the *emi* that gives life to the whole body and, therefore, can aptly be described through its causal functions (Idowu, 1962). Therefore, the presence of *emi* in, or its absence from, the body helps to determine whether a person is alive or dead (Oyeshile, 2006). Moreover, as a confirmation of life, "*emi* brings hope and makes desires realizable" (Gbadegesin, 1991, p. 153). The presence of *emi* ensures that the human body, previously lifeless, now becomes a human being, a being that exists. When it is recalled, the human being ceases to exist. Finally, Gbadegesin says the *emi* is more of the determinant and guarantor of existence. It is the breathing spirit put in a human body by the deity to turn it into a human being.

The *ori* is called the head of a person is the last element of the Yoruba conception of a person. Apart from the physical *ori*, which has just been described, there is an inner head (*ori inu*). The *ori* like the *okan*, has a dual character. It is seen as the physical head that is very vital in a person's character and is also the seat of the brain. More importantly, it is also seen as a determinant of a person's personality and destiny, which determines, controls and guides the life and activities of a person (Gbadegesin, 1991). At the first level, *ori* means the physical, visible, tangible head that contains the *opolo* (brain) (Gbadegesin, 1991). At the second level, *ori* is the determiner of the individual's personality or the essence of a person (Gbadegesin, 1991). That is, at the second level *ori* is taken to be a person's destiny. In Gbadegesin (1991) words, "It is thus *ori* so chosen, with the destiny wound up in it, that determines the personality

of the individual" (p. 38). Moreover, though the *ori* is symbolized by the physical head, it is not identical to it. For the *ori* is construed as the inner – or spiritual head. *Ori* orders the trajectory of a person's spiritual journey on earth. The *ori* thus can be seen as one's guardian spirit providing care, guardianship, and providence.

In this respect, the concept of *ori* is compared to the concept of a guardian angel in Christianity. The Yoruba point out whatever situation we find ourselves either good or bad is allowed by their *ori*. The *ori*, therefore, carries a person's existential manifesto. Whatever a person becomes is because of his *ori*. The claim is that "every person has his biography written before coming to the world" (Balogun, 2007, p.119). However, the Yoruba also believe that the *ori* cannot operate properly without the support of *ese* (leg) both in a physical and spiritual sense. As Abimbola puts it: It must be emphasized, however, that the Yoruba concept of the choice of destiny through *ori* also emphasizes the need for hard work to bring to fruition the potentiality for success represented by the choice of a good *ori*. This leads us to believe in *ese* (leg) as an essential ingredient of human personality. *Ese* (leg) is regarded by the Yoruba as a vital part of the human personality, both in a physical and spiritual sense (Oyeshile, 2006). Yoruba believe that *ori* is a mere potentiality. As a mere potentiality, it means that certain things must be done along with the choice of a good *ori* in order to bring such a hypothetically good choice into fulfilment (Gbadegesin, 2013). In light of the above, I find Gbadegesin's three constituents of person to be a more accurate interpretation of the cultural data than Adeofe's four constituents of person. I think there is a good reason it may not be necessary to include hard work (*ese*) as a constituent of personhood even though I agree that it is crucial to the realization of destiny. After all, the hard work (*ese*) is already entailed in the idea of destiny (*ori*), so there is no need to list the former as a separate constituent of a person (making them 4 rather than 3 as Gbadegesin says). Adeofe (2004) also focuses on three – implying as well that hard work is entailed in the idea of destiny and so does not have to be mentioned as a separate ontological constituent of person.

Thus, the Yoruba, like the Akan, have a tripartite conception of the person. The three elements are *ara* (body), *emi* (vital principle), and *ori* (destiny) are comparable to *nipadua*, *okra* and *sunsum*, respectively.

One might ask why it is important for my aims to present the metaphysical accounts of personhood. The reason is not just to survey the literature. More importantly, it is because the

metaphysical approach to person is fundamental to any plausible conception of person. Even though I agree with Wiredu and Ikuenobe that the normative account is more dominant, I also think it depends on the metaphysical account—that is, on the basic ontological constituents of persons. It is because individuals have a body, soul and personality that they are able to relate and carry out the obligations required in the normative view of personhood. Once we see this, the tension between the two approaches begin to evaporate. Let us now turn to the normative aspect of personhood as set out in African thought focusing on Menkiti and Ikuenobe.

## **2.2. Normative accounts: Menkiti and Ikuenobe**

In contemporary African philosophy, the first exposition of the normative conception of a person was given by Ifeanyi Menkiti, and further clarification comes from the writings of Polycarp Ikuenobe. In describing the normative conception of personhood, I look at three features—biological, relational and normative—that defenders of normative personhood hold. Regarding the first, one acknowledges, of course, that "it is a given fact that every individual has a body" (Menkiti, 2004, p. 324). Ikuenobe (2016) explicitly claims that one cannot satisfy the criteria of personhood if one does not have the descriptive metaphysical features of a person. Hence, non-human beings such as animals are not included in the discussion of personhood because Menkiti (1984) argues, "such an extension of moral language to the domain of animals is bound to undermine, sooner or later, the clearness of our conception of what it means to be a person" (p. 177).

With this said, a human in the biological and metaphysical minimal sense is able to move toward the status of social-moral personhood. This is what Menkiti means by the processual nature of personhood, culminating in what he calls the maximal sense of the term. As Menkiti argues, the notion of an individual who is not shaped by his community, its norms, and interests does not make sense in African cultures. Like Menkiti, Masolo (2010) and Ikuenobe recognizes the biological constitution of humans as a necessary but not sufficient basis of personhood. People have an awareness of their status as human beings, but for them to cultivate their awareness into that of personhood they must be part of a community – an idea Masolo, (2010) explicates in terms of the Luo notion of *Juok*. The project of being or becoming persons, it is believed, is a truly serious project that stretches beyond the raw capacities of the isolated individual, personhood is a matter that is achieved in the community.

In what follows, I set out the normative account under two broad themes, namely, personhood as relationality and as a processual achievement, and the relationship between community and individual.

### **2.2.1. Personhood as relationality and a processual achievement**

Personhood is attained and maintained through active relationality. Personhood is defined by the enviroing community rather than physical or psychological characteristics of the lone individual (Menkiti, 1984). Menkiti claims that essential to the idea of personhood is the fact that the individual human agent is essentially related to others and that s/he necessarily exists in a community characterized by norms that regulate behaviour and to which s/he must comply. According to Menkiti (2004), the idea is "of an individual, who recognizes the sources of his or her own humanity, and so realizes, with internal assurance, that in the absence of others, no grounds exist for a claim regarding the individual's own standing as a person. "The notion at work here is the notion of an extended self" (Menkiti, 2004, p. 324). This quote – and the idea of an extended self – aptly captures the relational element in Menkiti's maximal view of person. For Menkiti (1984) the African way of understanding what constitutes personhood does not attempt to identify certain isolated characteristics in individuals and then hold it up for all entities that want to be persons to possess.

Menkiti (1984) further argues that "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 man" (p. 176). Masolo (2011) underscores this point: in this kind of environment, the child develops a way to make sense of the world around her, learning through trial and error she develops a sense of who she is in relation to other people. One goes through rituals, which are an important aspect of the rites of passage, creating a person out of the untapped potentialities of a child. The idea here is that the community moulds one to internalize its norms as the basis for action and one has to adhere to communal norms and to use them to guide one's actions and mould one's character to achieve personhood (Ikuenobe, 2016). To illustrate this idea, in his reading of *The idea of personhood in Chinua Achebe's: Things Fall Apart*, Ikuenobe (2006) tells us that, Okonkwo did not fully internalize the communal norms and did not sufficiently allow these norms to mould his character and guide his conduct. He eventually failed to complete the process of achieving personhood because of these flaws (Ikuenobe, 2006). In this sense, being a person is attained "through an educational

process that intensifies at every stage in a person's growth and development" (Masolo, 2010, p. 243).

Menkiti and Masolo also defended the communitarian view on biological and psychological grounds. For instance, Menkiti (2004) assert that "Just as the navel points men to umbilical linkage with generations preceding them, so also does language and its associated social rules point them to a mental commonwealth with others whose life histories encompass the past, present, and future" (p. 172). The claim being made here is the idea that language, biology and psychological aspects of personhood are relational; they "intimates a message, not of beingness alone, but of beingness together" (Menkiti, 2004, p. 324). Masolo (2014), referencing Wiredu, alludes to this very idea. In his view, the child, and all humans for that matter, do not develop their sense of the world, including their sense of themselves, from an innate faculty, instead, it develops from birth as a function of the communicative conduct of those who make up the primary social environment of the child immersed in a communicative system (Masolo, 2014). For example, "babies are spoken to so they can imitate, and they are propped to take that first step in walking when the mother takes the lead" (Masolo, 2014, p.196). Accordingly, through the gradual leads of parents or other acquaintances, the child learns basic principles that anchor her or his sense of self and the basic attributes of self.

What we can take from this is that cognitive and moral capacities are developed by and in the context of their sociality (Masolo, 2014). Thus, "the self is part of a biosocial context in which her/his organic capacities such as the ability to form ideas and concepts are dependent and developed in the context of interactions with others" (Masolo, 2014, p. 195). Menkiti (2004) agrees with Masolo and asserts that the idea that language, biology and psychological aspects of personhood are relational. In all these examples, African scholars appear to share the view that it is difficult to think of the functional capacity of the person as not grounded in the relational circumstances that make his or her metaphysical peculiarities possible and concrete. Over and above this, it is required that a human being, related to specific others, also develops a certain level of maturity to count as a person.

Menkiti (1984) argues that "personhood is not simply a given because one is born of a human seed rather it requires some degree of maturation" (p.172). This would include the capacities for rational and moral deliberation, which are crucial for what Menkiti refers to as moral function. By moral function, Menkiti (1984) has in mind "a widened maturity of ethical sense

and the ability to discharge the various obligations defined by one's stations, which transform a non-person to a person in the normative sense" (p. 175). As a result, children, for instance, do not qualify as persons. In their case, "there is an absence of moral function in this sense" (Menkiti, 1984, p. 175). Children tend to be concerned solely with their own needs and have a tendency to see the world through their own perspective (Menkiti, 2004). That is, children do not as yet play an active moral role in the life of the community (Menkiti, 1984).

Personhood is a communal concept that is not automatically obtained at birth or by virtue of possessing certain features. The requirement is that one fully participate in the life of the community. It is for this reason that Menkiti (1984) informs us that "personhood is the sort of thing which has to be attained and one who has it is marked by a widened maturity of ethical sense" (p.176). "It is the carrying out ... [of] obligations that transforms one from the "it"-status of early childhood, marked by an absence of moral function, into the person-status of later years, marked by a widened maturity of ethical sense" (Menkiti, 1984, p. 176). To support his view of personhood as an achievement, Menkiti (1984) argues that when a child dies, there is relative absence of ritualized grief. However, when an older person dies, elaborate funeral celebrations take place and there is ritualized grief in the event of the death of an older person. This difference is not merely a qualitative difference but one of identity (Menkiti, 1984). I do not find Menkiti's interpretation of the cultural data to be accurate.

The mood and tone of the ceremony depends on various things and not the fact that children are not persons. When looking at mourning in the context of Zulu people of South Africa and Akan people of Ghana, for instance, elaborate funeral ceremonies and rituals are connected to death, not necessarily because one has achieved high personhood. Rather, flamboyant ceremonies and rituals have become an avenue to display pride and social status (Addai, 2014). On the other hand, families that are not financially buoyant would usually bury their dead loved ones in shame, as they cannot afford the elaborate ceremony (Biwul, 2015). Some of the impoverished will even go to loan sharks to obtain the means of burying a relative decently, according to the ideas of the community. The family also wants people to praise them for such luxurious ways. They want people to see that they are wealthy: it has nothing to do with the deceased being a person or failing at personhood. In addition, the intensity and length of mourning and performing rituals is not only indicating social status, but it may be seen as assisting the deceased on his or her journey to the afterlife (Radzilani, 2010). Many traditional African societies believe that the soul of the deceased must be assisted or allowed to pass from



the land of the living to its final resting place in the land of the dead (Walter, 1997). As a result, they perform bereavement rituals as a way of assisting or allowing the dead to join the ancestral world. For instance, in Zulu culture a person who has died violently requires specific ceremonies. That is, in order for a person to be accepted by his/her ancestors, s/he needs first to be cleansed. In this instance, specific rituals are performed. It is clear that the rituals and procedures associated with death in the Zulu community as described are not indication of personhood rather these traditions are geared towards helping the deceased leave his/her old relationships with the living world with the aim of entering the world of the *amadlozi* (ancestors). The rituals make the journey to this unknown territory easier and more relevant for the deceased. Funeral practices in this context depend on issues such as social status and how one dies. This implies that it has nothing with one being person or not being person.

The point here is related to Gyekye's (1997) suggestion that differences with respect to personhood cannot account for the difference in how the community deals with the death of infants and adults. For Gyekye the kind of burial or rituals that follow depends on other factors or beliefs and not the fact that children are not persons. The type of burial and the nature and extent of grief expressed over the death of an older person depend on the community's assessment, not of his/her personhood as such, but of the dead person's achievements in life, his/her contribution to the welfare of the community, and the respect he/she commanded in the community (Gyekye, 2002). If this analysis is correct, then it follows that the kind of burial given to newborn babies has nothing to do with them being persons or not (Gyekye, 1992). No distinctions as to personhood can be made on the basis of the nature and extent of ritualized grief over the death of a child or of an older person.

Ikuenobe (2016) alludes to Menkiti's idea of personhood as a sort of thing which has to be attained. For Ikuenobe, in order to achieve personhood, an individual must be morally matured. That is, one must be a rational, emotional, and autonomous person who has been sufficiently shaped and equipped by the norms, attitudes, and structures that are engendered by the realities of his community (Ikuenobe, 2016). "A moral person must also appreciate the communal reality and must internalize the requisite attitudes and values of the community" (Ikuenobe, 2016, p.120). This means that they fully participate in the life of the community. Achieving personhood depends on one's ability to use communal norms to guide one's actions. In this scheme of things age alone does not bring the recognition associated with personhood; personhood comes from achievements and excellence. This idea is supported by the proverb "it

is one's deeds that are counted, not one's years" (Ikuenobe, 2006, p. 13). For instance, Achebe exemplifies this idea, using the character of Unoka, Okonkwo's father, to show that not all old people are accomplished enough to be considered a person or a grown-up in the moral sense because in spite of his old age, he had no socially recognizable achievements (Ikuenobe, 2006). The propositions these thinkers are making is the idea that personhood is the sort of thing which has to be attained. In other words, a person is not just any individual and personhood is not automatically obtained at birth or by virtue of possessing certain features. Rather, a person is an individual who has attained the status of a responsible member of the society: personhood is achieved based on excellence, accomplishments, and recognition (Ikuenobe, 2006).

### **2.2.2. The relationship between the community and the individual**

On the relationship between the individual and the community, Menkiti (1984) stresses that, in the African understanding, "priority is given to the duties which individuals owe to the collectivity, and their rights, whatever these may be, are seen as secondary to their exercise of their duties" (p.180). Accordingly, the community, in his view, takes precedence over the individual. That is, priority is given to the duties which individuals owe to the collective, and rights are seen as secondary (Menkiti, 1984). This view is echoed by Dzobo (1992) who endorses the view that the community is more important than the individual because it is a system that has been prior to one's existence and it exists to support the development and well-being of that very individual. Senghor (1964) also argues that African society "puts more stress on the group than on the individual, more on the solidarity than on the activity and needs of the individual, more on the communion of persons than on their autonomy" (p. 231). This entails that the welfare and flourishing of the society takes precedence over individuals in the African setting. The community is at the center of every activity, value, practice, and belief. Menkiti's account has attracted criticism, as we shall see shortly through Kwame Gyekye's appraisal.

### **2.3. Gyekye's Objection to Normative Views**

Gyekye (1992) argues that Menkiti's views on personhood are overstated and not entirely correct and require some amendments or refinements. The major problem with Menkiti (and others) is that they consider the community to be always prior to the individual (Gyekye, 1997). According to Gyekye (1997) a person is a social being but also possesses other essential attributes such as rationality, capacity for virtue, ability to evaluate and make moral judgements which ultimately lead to the capability of choice. However, Menkiti fails to recognize this. Which consequently, leads to him exaggerating the normative status and power of the cultural

community in relation to those of the person (Gyekye, 2002). Gyekye's (1992) point is that Menkiti's view "fails to recognize the individuality of the individual and the rights that naturally belong to a human person insofar as a person is essentially autonomous" (p. 108). "A communitarian denial of rights or reduction of rights to a secondary status does not adequately reflect the claims of individuality mandated in the notion of the moral worth of the individual" (Gyekye, 1997, p. 61). For Gyekye (1992), rights belong primarily and irreducibly to the individual, for they (rights) are a means of expressing an individual's talents, capacities, and identity. Rather, defending the idea that the community always takes priority over an individual threatens certain crucial features of an individual like her autonomy and rights. Accordingly, Gyekye (1997) characterizes Menkiti's view of communitarianism as radical or extreme. Simply because it is inconsistent with or violates autonomy and it fails to give adequate recognition to the individual's creativity and inventiveness (Gyekye, 1997).

However, it is not clear that Gyekye's criticism is fair. After all, Menkiti requires that persons carry out responsibilities—and you can only carry out responsibilities if you are endowed with rationality and freedom of choice. For instance, in Menkiti's view, a 'maximal definition' of personhood, which involves the attainment and ascription of social-moral status in the community, one uses her descriptive biological, metaphysical, and psychological features as a material condition: in order to satisfy the social-moral criteria, one must have the metaphysical capacities of freewill, rationality, and agency. Criticizing Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism Menkiti (1984) indirectly implies that one should be able to appreciate their circumstances and the options available to them and make rational choices on that basis. This means he requires rational awareness and freedom as part of his view. In fact, citing William Abraham Menkiti (1984) says, "reason is part of our nature" (p.178). So, it is unfair of Gyekye to say he does not focus on non-communal aspects of the self. Etieyibo and Ikuenobe (2020) endorse this position when they say, "It could be argued that Menkiti's view is predicated on hybrid ethics based on human agency in that it requires one's to use metaphysical capacities and rationality to enhance communal harmony" (p. 3). Thus, Menkiti's view indicates one's metaphysical, psychological capacities of autonomy as a foundation for his moral substantive view. Just because he does not emphasize these features does not mean he discards them. Accordingly, Menkiti would agree with Gyekye that a community cannot do without individual autonomy, initiative, and free choices in terms of individuals' abilities to use their talents, creativity, and ingenuity (Etieyibo, 2018). Not everyone agrees with some of the claims Gyekye has presented. For instance,

Ikuenobe argues that Gyekye has misinterpreted or misunderstood Menkiti. Let us now consider some of Ikuenobe's reasons.

#### **2.4. Ikuenobe's response to Gyekye's normative critique**

In Ikuenobe's view, Menkiti's normative conception of personhood does not imply radical communitarianism or a denial of autonomy. Ikuenobe (2018a) argues that the normative conception of personhood in African traditions implies a relational and positive sense of autonomy. This autonomy involves the community helping or guiding one to use one's ability and knowledge of one's social relations and circumstance to freely choose the requisite goods for achieving one's life plan (Ikuenobe, 2018b). Therefore, the idea of autonomy which defines one's agency in the normative idea of personhood is a social-relational phenomenon (I shall return to this again in a subsequent chapter). Masolo (2011) expressing the same idea, claims that the capacity for an individual to be autonomous is shaped by the definite social conditions in which she finds herself. Her/his agency grows out of her/his constant interactive encounters with the environment in the form of different stages of community (family, school, workplace, etc.). For instance, through training in social environments the individual learns about the nature and importance of truth, and about a host of ethical and social values (Masolo, 2011). That is one's communicative encounter with the world through the gradual leads of parents or other acquaintances, one learns basic principles that anchor her or his sense of self and the basic attributes of self (Masolo, 2011). The above assertion implies that our autonomy will be shaped, constrained and limited by the relationships in which we are, and have been, engaged (Mackenzie and Stoljar, 2000).

It seems that the most reasonable description of what transpires from the above assertion is: there are limits to our sole individual knowledge. Hence, there is the need for guidance that may take the form of epistemic paternalism, epistemic dependence or deference (Ikuenobe, 2015). In Ikuenobe's (2018b) words, it is evidently true that the individual is not self-sufficient; her capacities, talents, and dispositions are not adequate for the realization of her potential and basic needs. That is, the individual is not always in the best epistemic position to judge and choose what is best for him to do. Thus, an Akan proverb states, "A person is not a palm tree that he or she should be complete or self-sufficient" (Wiredu and Gyekye, 1992, p. 113). This idea suggests that the lack of connections with one's community involves a lack of material conditions that will help one make free choices, develop, and flourish. This implies that one's autonomy and innate natural mental ability to make reasonable choices freely must be assisted,

informed and educated to understand the proper context (Ikuenobe, 2018b). The community helps, guides and provides one with options, and value systems that help one to make sense of one's choices and actions (Ikuenobe, 2015).

A critic may point out that obedience to communal authoritative directives is simply incompatible with autonomy. "Acting on what the authority judges ought to be done appears to circumvent one's own autonomy" (May, 2013, p.130). By circumventing the evaluative judgment of the individual, it seems the individual is prevented from acting on her own determination of what ought to be done. One then may ask, if Ikuenobe's view of autonomy prevents individuals from acting based on their preferences, what sort of autonomy is it? Also, what if we are dealing with a rogue community? Should not autonomy, if it is autonomy, enable the agent to distance herself from a rogue community? The individual cannot retain his autonomy and at the same time, be constrained and be under an obligation to obey social requirements.

Here is a possible response. The process assumes that the individual is potentially a rational, autonomous, and freely willing/choosing organism who must be trained, shaped, or helped by his community to use certain principles positively as the basis for reasoning in order to determine the proper choice or action that is acceptable in order to achieve one's life plan (Ikuenobe, 2015). This idea has been captured by Ikuenobe (2018b): the community "circumscribes one's freewill like a hole in a doughnut within which such freewill is used to make choices, it allows for individual's discretion to make free choices from among the available and acceptable options within the doughnut hole of what the community provides" (p. 218). It is still entirely up to the individual to determine exactly how to articulate herself. Therefore, the community does not determine one's actions or choices; it does not dictate specific rational life plans or one plan for everyone. Even when one has the relevant metaphysical properties to make free rational choices, one must have some connections with one's community (Ikuenobe, 2018a). Connecting one's autonomy to historical, political, economic, sociological and psychological insights is important as it allows us, as decision-makers, to make more informed decisions, which will likely result in moral decisions (Lafollette, 2007). Such an approach better helps us along a pathway to deal more effectively with choices, decision making and ethical dilemmas by eliminating those behaviours that do not conform to our sense of right and wrong. In addition, resources and opportunities in a person's relational world can provide a social environment, which strengthens self-identity and

autonomy. Accordingly, autonomy may be perceived not as isolation but in terms of a social environment of critical dialogue (Oshana, 2014). The most that can be said, then, is that autonomy is influenced by, the alternatives actually available for decision making depend on background norms, practices, social structures, and institutions that configure and limit options (Mackenzie and Stoljar, 2000).

I agree with Ikuenobe. A person's autonomy must be well formed by one's context. When one separates his choices and decisions from references external to himself, one does not make good choices. For instance, some children are seen as dishonest and greedy when there is no one to teach them the right way. Similarly, from a religious point of view, those who do not subscribe to religion may be more prone to unethical behaviour. In other words, it is not plausible to act merely by one's likes and opinions under the name of "my autonomy". This is simply important because individuals tend to make incorrect or unethical conclusions on their own. Further, by rejecting the idea of making autonomy relational to some normative social context, one would be suggesting that a person who pursues or yields to his selfish drives and the immoral passion of rape, which would destroy his social life and relationships, is truly rationally autonomous (Ikuenobe, 2015). Hence, the idea of autonomy, which enables the individual to choose his goals, actions, and life plans, must not derive in an internalist sense solely from one's own rational will. Rather, it must be guided in an externalist sense by moral principles or social commitments.

Without communal context providing the criteria, options, and value systems that help one to make sense of one's free will, choices, and actions, the ability or freedom to choose is empty or hollow (Ikuenobe, 2018b). In Ikuenobe's (2018b) words: "without a community, one's abstract rights and autonomy are nominal and vacuous; any corresponding claims are meaningless" (p. 215). This idea is anchored on Kymlicka's (1989) who argues that what enables individual autonomy which Liberalism rests on is the fact that our societal culture makes variable options available to us. Ikuenobe and Kymlicka's views suggest that one's moral autonomy is meaningless or empty if one does not have a community that will make options available and educate one on how to navigate one's way safely around the different options so that one can achieve one's desired goals or life plan. It is only in the context of community that people can make substantive claims about rights and autonomy. Accordingly, it is doubtful whether a metaphysical sense of autonomy for an atomic individual who is removed from the context of a rational and moral value system is, as Gyekye suggests, valuable in itself (Ikuenobe, 2006).

Two ideas emerge from the above. Firstly, the needs and interests of individuals derive from and depend on those of the community, and vice versa, insofar as those interests and needs are geared toward human welfare and the well-being of all individuals (Ikuenobe, 2015). In other words, the goal and organization of the community are such that the choices and actions that are beneficial to the community are reciprocally beneficial to the individual. Secondly, the conclusion that Menkiti draws from his African conception of a person is that the needs, reality, and existence of the community are coextensive with those of the individual, in which case the needs of the community do not supersede or undermine those of individuals (Ikuenobe, 2015). From the preceding discussion, one may conclude that Gyekye's critique of Menkiti's views of personhood, which he sees as having the element of radical communitarianism, derives from the fact that he does not give enough credence to the African normative view of a person as having relational and positive autonomy, as opposed to a non-relational (Ikuenobe, 2015). This is one of the strengths of Menkiti's view, Ikuenobe (2018c) argues, which has not been sufficiently appreciated; its identification of the community as a contextual basis for the relational and substantive nature of rights and autonomy. Accordingly, the whole accusation that the community envelops the individual such that there is no exercise of individuality is somewhat unfair.

### **2.5. Matolino's category mistake argument against the normative view**

Matolino (2014) rejects Menkiti's communitarian approach because of its inherent category mistake when they seek to answer the question of what a person is. For Matolino (2014), "one has committed a category mistake when she ascribes, to a certain entity, a property or properties which that entity could not have" (p. 142). The Afro-communitarian's mistake is that she locates persons in the 'socio-moral' category rather than the metaphysical category (Matolino, 2014).

To illustrate his point, Matolino (2014) distinguishes two sets of questions—one set addresses the question of 'what a person is' and the other addresses 'socio-moral' questions about persons or what a person does. The first category the metaphysical seeks to give certain features about persons as true to all persons. "It tells us the composition of persons and fixes the kinds of things that they are" (Matolino, 2014, p. 143). By metaphysical category, Matolino (2014) means those conceptions that are "free of communal considerations as primary constituents of the nature of persons" (p.72): The metaphysical identity includes the ontological constituents of all human beings. The second category is the communitarian, according to Matolino (2014): "it seeks to

explain how the characteristics in category one are animated in the lives of persons" (p.143). By communitarian category, he refers to all those conceptions that require for personhood communal participation and the performance of certain roles and obligations. The social identity pertains to how these constituents develop and function within a social atmosphere. Hence when invoking metaphysics of personhood, we should not be tempted to overload it with communitarian definitions (Matolino, 2014).

In consideration of the above, Matolino asserts that the error Menkiti makes arises when he conflates the two categories as mentioned above. Menkiti treats the second category questions as if they were the first category questions. "Conceived of in another way, Matolino's claim is that if, when talking about persons regarding their metaphysical identity, we are talking about strict ontology, then claims of moral agency and communality do not amount to metaphysical ontological claims" (Mbatha, 2017, p. 16). These two categories come apart. For Matolino (2014) "any form of communitarianism is not capable of saying anything on the metaphysics of personal identity" (p. 171). The idea is that the communitarian thesis is not apt to answer matters of strict ontological identity and needs to be limited to the socio-ethical arena (Matolino, 2014). "The communitarian has to show that the community is in the same category as attributes such as the *okra*, the *sunsum* and the *nipadua*" (Matolino, 2014, p. 157). By insisting that the community, which is extrinsic, constitute a person, Menkiti ascribes to persons a constitutive feature they cannot have (Matolino, 2014). Therefore, to claim that communality, a concept referring to the behaviour of an entity, and thus, belonging in the socio-moral realm, is an ontological feature of persons is to locate in the metaphysical category, features of persons which belong in the socio-moral category. In other words, to do so is to commit a category mistake. Oyowe disagrees with Matolino and claims that communitarians are not warranted to be accused of committing a category mistake.

### **2.5.1. Oyowe's critique**

Oyowe (2015) posits that properties like moral agency and sociality (communality) are not features that "persons could not have" (p. 509). In fact, for Oyowe, it is perfectly conceivable for persons to be communal in nature. In other words, a category mistake has not been committed because moral agency and communality are features persons could have. The normative view is not yet the target of the criticism, if a category mistake is understood as just described. Yes, a person belongs to the metaphysical category; a person is one among many natural kinds in our world. "But a person straddles the moral and social worlds as well, and



identifying person in both categories is not to be involved in a mistake, and certainly not a category mistake" (Oyowe, 2015, p. 509). The Afro-communitarian has not placed persons in the wrong category, by virtue of placing them in the 'socio-moral' category.

I think Oyowe's point here is correct: properties like moral agency and sociality (communality) are features that persons could have. As an Akan maxim has it, "when a person descends from heaven, he/she descends into a human society" (Gyekye, 1997, p. 38). The fact that a person is born into an existing community must suggest part of what it is to be a person is to be situated within the context of broader social, historical, and cultural context. I argue for a return to the Aristotelian view that "man is by nature a social animal". Persons must be understood not as static entities but as having a history and inhabiting a social world with others. As Gyekye (1997) states "A person comes to know who she is in the context of relationships with others, not as an isolated, lonely star in a social galaxy" (p.43). For instance, whom we are born to—the genes and bodies that we have—matter in determining our metaphysical properties. In Akan thought, parents are important in the composition of the human being.

Indeed, the source of a human being's composition is three-fold, God, the father and the mother (Antwi, 2016). This fact is never overlooked. Each supplies something in the making of the person. For instance, Wiredu's (1997) states that one's *sunsum* comes from the father and one's *mogya* (blood) comes from the mother. These components unite to form the unique person. Two points emerge from here: One, we cannot understand persons independently of their environment as Matolino assumes. Even at the level of metaphysics, persons are shown to be social – or relational. One can even point to genetic make-up as Menkiti does to illustrate that persons can have social or relational properties, contrary to Matolino. Many aspects of one's metaphysical properties are not matters of choice but are grounded from sociality. Two, our first-personal metaphysical self-interpretations only make sense to the extent that they are situated within the context of broader social, historical, and cultural narratives (MacIntyre, 1984).

It is also worth noting that metaphysical and mental properties are dependent on the community. For instance, in order to articulate one's own inchoate attitudes, one is in need of appropriate concepts. In this regard, "linguistic tools for articulation, can once again be acquired only through social and cultural interaction" (Kühler and Jelinek, 2012, p. 15). Babies are spoken to so they can imitate, and they are propped to take that first step in walking while the mother

takes the lead in slow motion, and so on (Masolo, 2010). The idea here is metaphysical properties are dependent on our interactions with others and to a larger extent our conduct is derived from the social world. Consequently, we cannot understand persons independently of their environment as Matolino assumes. One cannot advocate a complete separation between the metaphysics of community and the metaphysics of persons simply because these conceptions are related and not mutually exclusive as Matolino assumes. This is not to say the two categories cannot be separated. Somewhat, the two categories are related and Menkiti's account is acknowledging that. And to acknowledge that there is a relation between the two is, in Oyowe's words, "not a conflation of categories." Accordingly, Matolino's (2014) charge that "communitarians have committed a category mistake" by treating "the second category questions as if they were the first category questions" (p. 154) does not target Menkiti's communitarianism.

## **2.6. Plausibility of the normative view**

Physical features are grounded on more basic facts, cultural settings and social relations and they need to be seen within a context that can provide their full significance (Adeofe, 2004). Hence, one cannot just isolate these psychological and physical features and make them a criterion for personhood as this leads to one providing an erroneous relationship between the individual and the social world. From my perspective, if we take the normative view seriously, then we understand the fundamental role played by the community in one's life. First, by putting great emphasis on what its members ought to be, the community pays its attention not on actions as such, but rather on persons. The task, therefore, of development of the person's character is one of the fundamental functions of the community. For instance, the normative view emphasizes the idea of training one's children so that they can give back to the parent and the community at large. The purpose of the training is directed at the development of resourceful human beings in the service of their communities.

In this way, the community is a school for character. The community helps members to achieve this by providing them with a context for moral goodness and the attainment of virtues. In other words, the community avails itself as a form of practice in which the person in communion with others practices moral values and virtues necessary for character formation and development. The community is a place where people learn to be virtuous. Menkiti's idea of communitarianism is that the community helps individuals to develop the virtues of caring and mutuality that make it possible for individuals to rationally and autonomously choose a

substantive life plan and achieve their well-being based on the conditions, goods, and options that the community provides. The function of the community is, therefore, primarily the formation of character and acquisition of its qualities. So, our character is not something that we possess naturally, nor is it something that people can develop by themselves. However, this does not mean that individuals have no input in the process.

The normative view provides guidance for group members with how one they should act. It aims to foster an environment of ethical behaviour, the system of controlling our actions and our thoughts in order to operate in a community. This attitude creates the priority of duty, which is for the fundamental goal of creating a community, in order to provide the material conditions for actualizing individuals' substantive rights and well-being (Ikuenobe, 2018a). This consequently contributes to the satisfaction of our long-term interests and makes for a more effective collective society. On the other hand, the metaphysical view lacks emphasis on accountability regarding how morally one uses one's metaphysical capacity to enhance one's own well-being, the well-being of others and harmonious living<sup>5</sup>. This lack of emphasis on responsibility to others, human relations in a community and normative standards diminish the possibility of holding people accountable and responsible. In my view, a plausible conception of personhood must give credence to the duty element. Focusing on duties and responsibilities moves us towards a way of life based on the idea that we need to take responsibility for the way we live together. This is not to romanticize the idea of communitarianism. At times, the community may become a threat to the very dignity and existence of people. However, a normative view forces us to rethink how we understand the relations between the community and individual and how the individual's interests can be secured. Moreover, one cannot understand this if one holds the view that metaphysical properties and community separate.

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<sup>5</sup> The intention is not to oppose the two approaches but instead to highlight that these approaches are part of the same package, one supervenes on the other and should be understood as related somehow. The idea here is that it seems our metaphysical attributes alone are not sufficient to determine what it is for one to be oneself and by focusing simply on the metaphysical view alone one fails to appreciate fundamental practical concerns connected to our animality and the nature of being a person. This is not to deny the validity of physical attributes — one cannot be a person in the normative communal sense unless one is already imbued with metaphysical properties.

### 3. Towards Zulu conception of personhood

Before the ascendancy of King Shaka, the term “Zulu” referred to only one clan that recognized a man named Zulu as its founding ancestor. Following Shaka's period of conquest and consolidation in the first quarter of the 1800s, the term came to refer to hundreds of clans under the control of the Zulu monarchy. Shaka and Senzangakhona (identified as Shaka's father), extended the use of the name considerably when he incorporated the members of different clans into the Zulu kingdom. “Zulu” or AmaZulu later became the name of these people. Today Zulu ethnic identity derives primarily from shared culture, traditions, and language (Thorpe, 1991).

According to Zondi (2015), the Zulu people are known for holding on to their cultural beliefs, and the custom of *ukuhlonipha*, responsibility and caring are vital components of this because this is how a man's lineage is said to continue. Historically, the Zulu community was located in the area known as Zululand which currently falls in KwaZulu Natal province of South Africa. They are, however, presently scattered all over as a result of forced migration, colonialism and the apartheid's era of forced removals.

The primary aim of this chapter is to critically explore the cultural, linguistic and normative resources of the Zulu people in understanding what it means to be a person. Zulu people have a unique sense of self and identity, derived from ancient traditions and culture that is maintained at some level to this day. Through a brief overview of Zulu history and tradition and by synthesizing the empirical data collected during the course of this study, this chapter aims to investigate and articulate the Zulu conception of personhood. More clearly, this chapter examines two central aspects of personhood — the social aspect of mutual recognition and as well as the significance of responsibility. These values, beliefs and principles described and analyzed in this chapter have been selected because they continue to be honoured by the Zulu people despite significant changes in their lifestyle. In this chapter, I attempt to demonstrate that what we see in the literature as the dominant view of personhood somehow overlaps with the Zulu cultural understanding of personhood. The data collected will be central to the chapter. The data from participants is explicated in such a way that it shows that traditionally Zulu people held a conception of personhood that aligns more closely with the normative conception of personhood than with the purely metaphysical view. I am not rejecting the metaphysical view; the normative view depends on the metaphysical one. It is just one-step further, asserting that in addition to the metaphysical constituents of a person, there are also social and normative features at play. From my assessment of the data, I gathered it is very clear that the traditional

Zulu understanding that I put together, and my analysis of the data shows that it aligns very clearly with the ideas in the literature.

I think this kind of expository project is important for several reasons. First, the major strategy informing the present Zulu conception is that it appreciates the dual features of the idea of personhood, namely, the metaphysical and normative features. This fact can be easily overlooked, as one finds in the literature on African philosophy that the two approaches are sometimes pitted against each other. The argument I put forward here is that a more robust approach to the conception of personhood in African philosophy requires us to appreciate that the metaphysical and the normative accounts are interdependent. Second, this conception makes use of empirical data and potentially opens up a platform for further dialogues between different cultures (especially within Southern Africa) regarding personhood.

### **3.1. Personhood is defined and embedded in a system of relationships: mutual recognition**

I begin by observing that personhood is not seen as an abstract or theoretical concept but grounded in attitudes, activities, practices and institutions that are socially sanctioned. One cannot understand the concept of personhood without considering facts about the community. A person's very existence is connected to the family and more specifically, the community context. By community, I mean an assembly of individuals where they share a social space and where one is dependent on his or her social world to fulfil organic needs as well as moral and conceptual growth.<sup>6</sup> For the Zulu, it is the lived experience and reality of being in a relationship that forms the identity of persons. An individual belongs to a family unit, extended family or clan.<sup>7</sup> In other words, relationality plays a crucial role in providing the individual with values that emphasize the significance of her participation in as well as dependence on the community for her sense of self, for her freedom, and her moral development and agency. This idea becomes clearer when one looks at the idea of mutual recognition in the Zulu community. There are two connected modes of recognition necessary for an individual's development of personhood: relationality and *hlonipha* (roughly, the idea of respect). Over and above this, it is required that one contributes to the continued existence of the community.

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<sup>6</sup> I do not make any metaphysical claims about the community being an entity or that it has independent reality, as one finds in Menkiti's early writing (see 1984, p. 171–172, for example). I do not think that one needs to make those claims to make sense of the social and normative aspects of personhood. I simply note here that community is a context for various kinds of possibilities for individuals (see Gyekye, 1997 and Masolo 2009, for these less controversial views of community).

<sup>7</sup> This observation is not new. John Mbiti (1969) is also well known to have found that the kinship system is the basic unit of social organization.

In what follows, I set out the Zulu normative account under three broad themes namely, mutual recognition in the custom of *hlonipha*; mutual recognition through relationality, including the virtues of helping and caring; and carrying out social responsibilities.

### **3.2. The mode of mutual recognition in the custom of hlonipha**

The mode of recognition termed respect, *hlonipha*, is an essential component of Zulu culture, and it forms the foundation for existence. In Zulu culture, the meaning of the term *hlonipha* has significant breadth and depth as well as a wide scope of application. *Hlonipha* is understood as a complex social and linguistic behavioural codex that requires deferential conduct (Rudwick and Shange, 2009). Some essential meanings were expressed by Doke and Vilakazi (1972) in their Zulu-English dictionary as follows: "Respect, reverence, regard with awe, honour and veneration act respectfully, modestly" (p. 334-335). Raum (1973) notes that the term *hlonipha* also has abstract aspects and, its meaning ranging from to obey, (e.g. one's parents), to a sense of decency. The term *hlonipha* broadly refers to both the linguistic and behavioural aspect of the custom of respect. This custom involves both speech and action as a form of respect (Finlayson, 1984; Herbert, 1990).

Respectful speech also termed *isihlonipho*, primarily centres on avoidance of specific phonemes, typically those found in one's in-laws names. In terms of behavior, Zulu communities have many unique demands for respectful action. Eye contact is viewed as disrespectful and young people are expected to avoid staring at the face or into the eyes of the elderly speakers. A young person is not allowed to sit down while an adult person has no place to sit and females do not sit with their knees up. All children are expected to be obedient (In listing these instances of respect, I do not mean to endorse all of them but simply to capture facts). So, respect for seniors is significant and valued in the Zulu community. This does not imply that young people do not receive respect or are not respected by elders. Respect is a cornerstone in Zulu culture as reflected in the following saying as well as in the comments by some of the participants in the study:

Uhlonipha omncane, uhloniphe omdala (translated as, respect everyone young and old).

P4: Respect is very important, it does not look at one's age, respect is expected from both the old and the young people, so it does not look at one's skin colour or

age. It is good to practice respect so people can live in harmony. If people do not respect each other, then trouble starts.

P2: The first thing I know is to respect. Whether you are young or old, respect comes first if you want to do Ubuntu and be a person.

These extracts convey the notion of respect is essentially concerned with the respect that is due to all human beings in virtue merely of being human (i.e., young and old). The conception of respect advocated here can be linked with the idea of intrinsic value and human dignity. Therefore, the agent here receives respect and has dignity merely because she possesses relevant ontological features. That is attitudes of recognition are responses to metaphysical features that characterize human persons. In virtue of possessing these features, the agent is entitled to basic respect. Human dignity, whatever it is, it is not based on merit or accomplishment, is not just a status we bestow upon ourselves. Human dignity, in some sense, under this idea of personhood, has something to do with intrinsic features of a person. Accordingly, respect and dignity are attributed to every human being.

This idea echoes in the works of Wiredu (1996) who assigns dignity on relevant ontological features. For instance, for Wiredu, human beings have dignity merely because they possess the divine speck—okra. Molefe (2019) holds the same position. He argues that we assign dignity and we respect human persons because of their ontological make-up. Whereas there are broad areas of agreement between Molefe and Wiredu, Ikuenobe (2017, 2018a) is keen to differentiate his conception of dignity. Ikuenobe (2018a) argues instead that a plausible African view of dignity must be understood as something that the agent earns and comes to deserve depending on the positive use of her capacities. That is, for Ikuenobe, dignity does not trace one's ontology; rather, he defends a performance-based idea of dignity (Molefe, 2019). I do not wish to adopt Ikuenobe's view of dignity because Ikuenobe's view of dignity does not apply to Zulu people. Most importantly, his view invites problems of its own. While I do not intend to dwell on those problems, it would suffice to say that that view of dignity might lead to differential moral status among human beings. In other words, those who perform more will have higher dignity and thus be entitled to better treatment.

It is worth noting as well that Molefe disputes Ikuenobe's view on dignity. One of the criticisms Molefe (2019) put forward on this idea is that if dignity is something that we earn relative to moral performance then, it follows that we have no direct duties of respect to the young or

marginal cases. "Basing dignity on personhood then exposes the young and the marginal cases to harm, as they will not have the moral protection (the so-called agent-centred restrictions) offered by dignity when it is construed strictly in ontological terms" (Molefe, 2019, p. 119). I agree with Molefe though not for the same reasons. I argue that we intuitively ascribe human dignity, hence respect to beings who do not use their capacities to a large degree. For instance, there are many elderly people who do not reflect any moral maturity and who are not accomplished enough and have no socially recognizable achievements but yet we give them respect; they are not denied their dignity. Further, if we did not consider them to have dignity, we would have no issue mistreating them. However, that is not the case. One's lack of achievements does not take away one's dignity. It can be assumed, then, that dignity does not trace one's achievements; rather, it traces one's ontological attributes.

Also implicit in the discussion above is the manifestation of personhood in a person is revealed in the manner in which he or she treats other people. Notice that this is reflected in the response by P4 above. Moreover, other participants' narrations coincided with this idea as can be seen in the excerpts below:

P2 made the concise statement: I practice personhood by my actions.

P1: As another participant sums it up: the characteristics of a person who has the status of personhood definitely have got to do with moral conduct. It is how you conduct yourself and how you treat other people and knowing the importance of respect and helping other people.

P4: As the saying goes, a person is a person through other people, you cannot live without other people. It does not matter how much money one has if you do not have Ubuntu nothing will go your way. It is like having money and not being happy, you are like a dead person. A poor person can help a rich person and a rich person can help a poor person.

These quotes indicate that the idea of moral status attributes respect to some entity merely because it possesses relevant ontological features. It also suggests that value is given to who one is as a person in relation to others, rather than to what one has (Mkhize, 2008). In other words, the nature and quality of one's relationships with others is of ultimate importance rather



than your monetary wealth, intelligence or social standing. The mode of dignity and respect under mutual recognition alone do not yet fully determine any definition of personhood. Personhood in this conception goes beyond respecting intrinsic attributes: it is centred on a social-moral level: relationships of sharing and caring.

### **3.3. The mode of recognition through relationships of helping and caring**

The values espoused in mutual recognition emphasize caring, sharing, co-operation, compassion and empathy in order for human beings to develop, flourish and reach personhood. To be a person, one needs to conduct their relationships in a manner that promotes the well-being of others. That kind of solidarity is clearly manifest in events such as death. For example, it is a part of Zulu custom and culture that when someone in the community passes away, everyone participates in the funeral preparation/ process and not just the members of the family.

The women partake in cooking activities to feed the gathering people, and the men take care of the logistical aspects of how the funeral procession will take place<sup>8</sup>. In this manner, death, and the loss of a loved one, not only affects the family but the community as well, which is why they lend support. Caring for your neighbour and community thus means taking part in all communal and neighbourhood activities. People are expected to be in solidarity with one another, especially during the hour of need. Oftentimes, cooperative and caring behaviours such as these ones establish new and foster old relations. This particular subtheme was verbalized by many participants. They noted specifically that their community and neighbours played a prevalent role in their experiences:

P3: Um, support hey, even support is very much, um; because after I lost my mom, a lot of people came around to support, people coming around and checking up, you know? You show personhood by helping someone without them even asking you for help. And in helping this person you do not expect anything back your help comes from a place of love. Sometimes it is not just about helping out; it is about caring as well.

P1: When it comes to that, being a person, to me, ah, here, I can be able to go to my neighbour and say I do not have food and he or she can be able to help me... To

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<sup>8</sup> This is referred to as “mutual aid” (Wiredu, 1992, p. 201).

empathize with another person who is troubled and helping other people. You see when you come here with a problem, and I help you in any way I can.

P4: We help each other – it is something that normally happens. So, I follow that route. It is who I am. I like to help other people.

These extracts express the idea that the community serves the purpose of lending support and care. The sense of the community reinforces the view that one's existence and the existence of others are dependent on others. For participants, such behaviours seemed to function as a way of forming and maintaining a support network of interdependent relationships. It also suggests that the provision of support and care to other people are important benevolent behaviours seen to demonstrate mutual recognition and thus personhood effectively. Their narrations mirror those conceptualizations of communal personhood, which emphasizes community participation (Menkiti, 1984). For example, in one place, Menkiti (1984) explicitly says that personhood "is attained in direct proportion as one participates in communal life" (p. 176) and in another says "certain ways of being or behaving in the world may be so off the mark as to raise important questions regarding the person-status of their doers" (2004, p. 326). Accordingly, it can be interpreted that, for these participants, a major part of being a person is about community involvement, particularly, about showing in conduct and way of being, recognition of the other, developing and maintaining mutually beneficial relations, with community members. The deepest moral obligation, therefore, "is to become more fully a person which implies entering more and more deeply into the community with others" (Shutte, 2001, p. 16). That is, a human being must embody mutual recognition, and act or behave in ways that show care and help if he or she wants to be known as a person. As one participant puts it:

P2: You have to help other people out in order to be known as a person, as umuntu... to become that man of great stature or whatever; you need people to help you. That's the core foundation of it all and that's that person who will help others. For example, in this pandemic there are parents who work as domestic workers who have lost jobs one way to show Ubuntu in this context would be to open a feeding scheme and help those people with food. That Ubuntu you are doing something without expecting anything back.

These extracts indicate that mutual recognition is showcased through the humane act of helping others out. This extract taken from P2 conveys that providing “help” is the very thing that allows an individual to strengthen relations and be known by other people as a person. And, as we saw above, it is part of the “core” of personhood in the social and normative sense. What this essentially reveals to us about the virtue of caring and helping is that the behavioural guidelines recommend an attitude that does not support selfishness, but rather it encourages people to look beyond their own selfish desires and needs in order to assist other people (Msengana, 2006). There is an emphasis on group membership and social responsibility in contrast to the ‘wants’ of the individual. Here, again, Menkiti’s (2004) explicit claims are helpful as he states, "we have to go beyond the raw appetitive level to the special level marked by the dignity of the person" (p. 325). What I take from this is that being a person involves going beyond satisfying one’s own appetites, and requires other-regarding. The participants acknowledge and mention important elements of mutual recognition, such as it does not support selfishness. One informant stated:

P1: A person with mutual recognition is someone who takes the concerns of others into account or consideration before their own self-interest.

P3: Knowing that I have to help and share with other people. So it’s something that I learned at home, something that I saw and practiced.

In this light, one can say that this model of mutual recognition discourages people from seeking their own good without regard for, or to the detriment of, other persons in the community. A person who fails to grow into relating with other persons in an acceptable way is regarded inhuman. For example, individuals who lack the virtue of helping, caring and supporting their fellow social members are considered to be “nonpersons”. When a person possesses negative qualities that go against the values of personhood, it is said that *akanabuntu* (he or she lacks ubuntu) or *akangomuntu* (he or she is not a person) (Manda, 2010). P4 articulates how human beings without personhood are viewed by others:

P4: ... personhood is what you do; that is what you are supposed to do! A real person helps out, that is a real person! Not this, you know... You know they will even call you a dog, and if you do not show help, you are not a person if you do not look out for each other you know.

In the above statements two implications are noteworthy. First, although every individual is born human, the formation of personhood comes through the process of socialization (Menkiti (1984) and Wiredu (2009). Being a communal person is something that is achieved and not innate from birth. The individual is in the process of becoming a person when his or her activities encourage, among other qualities, caring for others, compassion towards others, tolerance of others and respect for others. One participates in a community, exercises and endorses the values espoused in modes of recognition to be a person. If someone fails to embody caring, helping, respect, then that human-being is not *umuntu* (a person) and may be labelled by others as a “dog”. Most *Bantu* languages use phrases like —he is not a person or—he is an animal. These expressions do not imply that a person is akin to an animal. This does not take away from the intrinsic worth of that person (dignity). However, what these sayings suggest is that the human being has lost his personhood or humanity. In this understanding, personhood is about one, demonstrating socially moral behaviour – If one is indifferent, disinterested or antagonistic towards other community members, or the community as a whole, then one is failing to show solidarity, and thus failing to be a person (Metz, 2011). Beyond mutual recognition and its components, this Zulu conception requires individuals to be fully aware of their responsibilities and obligations towards the family and the community in general.

#### **3.4. The significance of social responsibility and fulfilment of responsibility**

For the Zulu community, being a person is also primarily about performing particular social roles and upholding certain responsibilities regarding one’s relatives and community. Mutual recognition and the custom of *hlonipha* arms one with "normative principles for responsible decision-making and action, for oneself and for the good of the whole community" (Manda, 2007, p. 33). As interrelatedness makes personhood possible, a person has an inherent responsibility to do that which is advantageous for such interrelations (Mkhize, 2006; Ramose, 1999; Menkiti, 1984). Being a person requires one to be responsible and to conform to community norms. The entrenched sense of responsibility to do what is right by others is exemplified in the following quotes from participants:

P4: I don’t want to let my family down. If they need help with anything, they can call me and I’m there for them, I have to be there. I haven’t got a choice.

P2 highlighted that: The need to provide for one's family is key to the expectations of a husband and father in Zulu households. As the head of the family, a Zulu man needs to be able to support his family's needs, ensure that they are able to live comfortably and do not lack for anything.

In this extract, P4 verbalizes a strong sense of obligation and responsibility towards his family. What the two passages are saying, as I understand them, is that there is the power of responsibility that comes with personhood, where it is felt to be a person's absolute responsibility to behave and act benevolently for the sake of others and one's own personhood (Menkiti, 1984). These sayings show that the concept of a person is related to those behaviours that are concerned with being responsible. Furthermore, this sense of responsibility supports a communal identity and ensures communal responsibility and well-being (Masolo, 1994). It can also be seen from this extract that this sense of responsibility seems to apply pressure to be a good example and lead a worthy life for the sake of one's honour and others. Accordingly, it is a moral responsibility for members of communities to actively participate in all that contributes to the life of the community. The ethical values of compassion, solidarity, reciprocity, co-operation, interdependence, inter-relation, social well-being and common good impose a sense of duty on the individual towards other members of a nation-state, which is irrespective of their ethno-cultural or linguistic group. In the Zulu community, one way to show this responsibility is in the milestone of marriage and having children.<sup>9</sup>

Marriage is viewed as an important and necessary milestone in both a man and a woman's life in order to grow the family and to give a sense of belonging. The centrality of marriage is based on the fact that marriage is the event in which two persons willingly express their desire to cooperate to keep the society immortal (Chuwa, 2014). Marriage is a unique opportunity that reveals a couple's willingness to give back to society by accepting the role of keeping the chain of generations going. Therefore, marriage in Zulu culture is a progressive development not just of the two people involved but the extended families and clans. Marriage is the main way the individual and the community fulfil their duty to promote and impart life (Ngobese, 2003). In Zulu society, the birth of a child is a moment for celebration, an important occasion because Zulus believe that the children in a marriage ensure the continuity of the parents' life through

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<sup>9</sup> It is worth noting I am not endorsing these practices but simply presenting them and the role they play in personhood. I think it's important to indicate that – there may be other forums to assess their moral value, but for now my aim is to set out the position clearly.

ritual remembrance (Ngobese, 2003). The child is important also for the continuation of the life of the community (or its development). Whoever promotes individual life, one's own life or that of another, strengthens the lineage. Similarly, whoever neglects 'life' and fails to contribute harms the same community. Accordingly, men and women have a responsibility, which is assuring community survival.

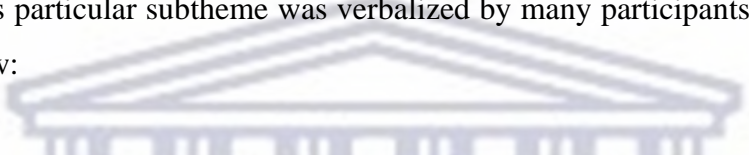
Being a responsible person changes one's social standing. For instance, for any Zulu to be respected and be recognized as a leader in the community "he must have transmitted life to the offspring and have a proven record of managing family and community " (Ngobese, 2003, p. 76). Similarly, throughout history, Zulu women who were *lobola'd*, married and bore children have received considerable recognition in the community, gained in status (Ndlovu, 2008; Vilakazi, 1962). So, at marriage, the woman attains a new status in life: to be the bearer or keeper of life, as well as its transmitter (Posel and Rudwick, 2011). Through marriage and the birth of a child, the individual himself has now become more fully a person. A key element of personhood is evident here: in the Zulu community, personhood is socially fluid; one has to continuously negotiate their rank and status and to extend themselves across social space. Through successful negotiation of challenges, and through advancing age and growing wisdom, one attains to higher levels of individual existence. Accordingly, within this conception, human beings not only need other humans but also are adequately individuated by their social roles and responsibilities if they are to attain full personhood.

One might be tempted to emphasize the apparent individualist aspect expressed in this criterion by pointing out that you can only carry out responsibilities if you are endowed with rationality and freedom of choice. The individual uses her descriptive biological, metaphysical, and psychological features as a material condition in order to satisfy the social-moral criteria. It is because individuals have metaphysical capacities of free will, rationality, body and agency that they are able to relate and carry out the obligations required in the normative view of personhood. This expresses two ideas. One, normative view relies on various metaphysical features that persons have. In other words, the normative discourse of personhood takes the fact of being human as a point of departure; at least some crucial features of it are necessary for the possibility of normative-becoming (Ikuenobe, 2006). Two, our individual effort is a necessary condition for fulfilling our needs and reaching our goals. This idea is part of a body of evidence that the espousal of communal values does not in any way involve the rejection of individual agency; this view accord due recognition to individuality. Therefore, the community does not


entirely determine one's actions or choices; it does not dictate one's life. It is the task of each agent to ultimately pursue her own moral life (Gyekye, 1997). This should not be read as prioritizing the individual; hence, contradicting what is stated above regarding community in Zulu culture. Instead, this conception should be understood as recognizing the claims of both communality and individuality.

### **3.5. Synthesizing the key findings**

In the above statements, three implications are noteworthy. First, the Zulu worldview is not individualistic but relational and/or communitarian in orientation. Personhood is understood relationally. We do not come fully formed into the world. We need other human beings in order to be human. This particular subtheme was verbalized by many participants as can be seen in the excerpts below:



P2: As a person, you need other people in your life. There are things and problems one goes through that need assistance or help from other people for you to get through, you need the help of others to solve these problems. So as a person, you need people all the time. Even when looking at success, you cannot do it without the help of other people. For example, consider your brother a soccer player. He may work hard in the gym and on the playing field, but he needs other people to achieve, he cannot achieve success on his own. He needs coaches, trainers, family, and friends to guide, encourage, and provide for him.



P4: You cannot live life on your own like you are in your own world, everything one does always involves another person. For example, when you have to get to work you need to use a taxi, the driver of that taxi is a person who is transporting you to work. Even people who drive their own cars when they stop at gas stations, it is a person who is helping you fill up your gas. All the time, it is people who are helping you. So, you need people all the time.

In the context of the relationship between the individual and the community, these extracts suggest that individuals cannot survive outside of their respective communities as much as fish cannot survive outside of water. It also suggests that the individual is not self-sufficient, her capacities, talents, and dispositions are not adequate for the realization of her potentials and basic needs; one has needs and goals that cannot be fulfilled except through cooperation with

other human beings (Ikuenobe, 2018b). Consequently, one cannot speak of personhood outside of the community.

Second, interpersonal relations enable persons to receive recognition, and thereby to build and maintain positive relations needed for individual self-realization. Human beings in particular have the primary desire to belong with their conspecifics and group. For this, it is necessary that they recognize each other through respect, care, and support. Due recognition is not only a courtesy we owe to people, but more importantly, it is a 'vital human need'. This idea is supported by Wiredu (2008) when he says, "The sorts of things around which the obligations and rights revolve are all the different kinds of needs that arise in human existence and interaction" (p. 333). We are social animals, who need recognition from other people and these needs are a vital component of how personhood is conceived. In addition, without the experience of mutual recognition, the individual psyche would remain seriously deficient with respect to the enabling conditions of individual self-realization, and without its societies and communities would lack the social or interpersonal infrastructure which keeps them together in the first place. Thus, mutual recognition is a vital need.

A critic may point out that a purely theory of personhood dependent on mutual recognition is not plausible. Put simply, the concern is that a theory where one demands positive recognition from others to be a person will face the problem of partiality. Consequently, this puts some individuals at risk of being ostracized. In the words of Molefe (2019), "partiality involves attaching greater value to some subset of persons, not on the basis of some intrinsic feature of these persons, but on the basis of the special relationship one has with them" (p. 127). If personhood is dependent on mutual recognition, some individuals will favour their own, recognize people they have special relationships with and disregard others who they are not kin to; hence this heightens forms discrimination. It follows that those who are not recognized do not have the moral status, so they might be victims of intolerance and social exclusion.

I am keen to stress that this conception is not committed to partiality. Mutual recognition, under this idea of personhood, has nothing to do with ties one has with the next person rather it is grounded on intrinsic features of the person. Thus, people whom one has special relationships with are not respected or get recognized more than someone one is not related to—people are treated equally because of their ontological properties. Second, in this understanding, personhood is about demonstrating socially moral behaviour, exercising the values espoused in



mutual recognition, so if you do not treat others with respect, and this includes people with which one does not have special ties, you are not enriching your personhood instead you are losing your own personhood. This idea is supported by Wiredu (1992) when he argues: "One's image depends crucially upon the extent to which his or her actions benefit others than himself not, of course, by accident or coincidence but by design" (p. 200). One has a personal stake in treating others respectfully, because failing to do so one runs the risk of losing one's own personhood; it has serious implications for one's reputation or social standing. My move towards impartiality has respectable support in the literature from Kwasi Wiredu.

Wiredu construes his principle of right action in terms of sympathetic (empathetic) impartiality. One principle proposed in sympathetic impartiality is the idea that "let your conduct at all times manifest a due concern for the interests of others" (Wiredu, 1996, p. 29). This is the principle he considers essential for the harmonization of diverse human interests in society. This idea of sympathetic impartiality engenders duties, solidarity, human welfare and obligations to promote the welfare of the society at large (Wiredu, 2008, p. 333). The communalism kinship relations in this idea are therefore to be broadened, it is not just your kids and your kin in terms of blood ties one is morally obligated to but moral obligations expands to the clan, to the village, to the society and humanity at large. Simply put, though she has immediate duty to herself and family, all things equal, she also has a duty to the community (humanity) at large (Wiredu, 1997). This idea "works particularly to the advantage of foreigners, who ... are doubly deserving of sympathy; on grounds, first, of their common humanity and, second, of their vulnerability as individuals cut off for the time being, at any rate, from the emotional and material supports of their kinship environment" (Wiredu, 1992, p. 202).

The fact that these people are away from their families and kin it actually gives one additional reason to care for them. Human interest is the basis of all values and that human fellowship is the most important of human needs (Wiredu, 1992). The fact that you are my mother, sister, or uncle, personal as it might be, does not factor into this idea of sympathetic impartiality; there is no place for special relationships. What is valuable is not relations per se but human relationships then one begins to understand the impartiality here. I am not subscribing to Wiredu's view but all I am saying is that the strategy that he offers can be useful in thinking about impartiality in personhood. In the next section, I expand more on the idea of personhood as a social category.

### 3.6. Metaphysical properties are not sufficient for personhood

One might argue that the first-person perspective carries more weight than the relational aspect. "Although all persons can be said to be social by nature; what makes them persons is the mere possession of key metaphysical elements as opposed to sociality of any form" (Matolino, 2014, p. 166). The first-person perspective is the foundation and origin both of personhood and what matters about us. For instance, there are attributes such as thoughts and physical properties, which are inherent to individuals and are responsible for how individuals operate in the world: these metaphysical attributes explain the importance of being a person and the characteristics associated with personhood<sup>10</sup>. That is, they enable one to be responsible because one knows what one is doing and what one has done. Consequently, some understanding and some representation of the private, inner aspects of the self is more important than what the community holds. The first-person perspective, then, is the ground of our personhood, our rationality and our moral agency. That is, metaphysical self plays a more crucial role than the relational person view (Baker, 2009). The next section I want to argue that metaphysical approach is not sufficient to explain personhood in the Zulu context given the data I have gathered.

More clearly, I wish to make the point that metaphysical properties alone do not exhaust the meaning of personhood. In other words, being a person and being a human being is not the same thing. "Person refers to the fact that we are social entities, "human being" to the fact that we are organic entities" (Adeofe, 2004, p. 72). Personhood is a social category, not a natural kind (it is constituted in part by social and moral facts) – what one is concerns natural facts – e.g., biological facts. So, to the question of what we are, one might say we are human beings. Nevertheless, personhood concerns social and moral facts. As such, it necessarily includes what we do in the social world. "We are what we are in virtue of participating in the larger life of our society" (Taylor, 1984, p. 183). That is participation in society makes us what we are (persons).

Our metaphysical properties are essential to our lives; however, among other things we also value that our physical properties continue to function a certain way. For instance, if an athlete would lose the use of his legs, he would probably also feel that an important part of himself was lost. One values how their bodies function too. The idea here is that it seems our metaphysical attributes alone are not sufficient to determine what it is for one to be oneself. Who I am depends

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<sup>10</sup> For another metaphysical authoritative account of personhood in African thought, see Kwame Gyekye, 1995.

on what these brute metaphysical features do for me and what I make of them. The point is that a person becomes who he is by what he does repeatedly and habitually. "Through the perception of our own frequently performed behaviors, we infer that these are important to us and may thus be part of who we are" (Strohminger and Nichols, 2014, p. 11). This idea is also presented by Taylor (2010) when he mentions —what a thing is, is based on action in specific contexts, and who we are is a matter of what we choose to do and how we choose to invest in what we do. Accordingly, part of what it means for an organism to exist is for it to interact with its environment (Schechtman, 2014).

One can even find support in everyday examples. For instance, part of what it means to be a fish is for its internal processes to interact with its environment. Intrinsically it is a cold-blooded animal. Its internal processes do not allow it to regulate body temperature. So, if you were to remove it from the water and leave it in a warm environment, it will die quickly. Its internal properties, so to speak, are not attuned to that environment focusing only on its internal properties is not sufficient to understand its nature. Likewise, part of what it means for an organism to exist is for it to interact with its environment (Schechtman, 2014). "The human person is a relational being... human beings have a natural tendency to live in a society (sociability)" (Melé and Cantón, 2014, p. 190). Without social interaction, each of us will slowly lose our meaning to our lives. Who we are, is made up of all sorts of habits, social projects and practices. And these define what we are as individuals, give us cause to live and help us become who we are meant to be. For instance, one can think of an individual who is very much committed to gender equality, one's identity includes membership in a particular organization or friendships. These habits, social projects and practices are responses to our existence; they give us an understanding of what it means to be a human being, person and an understanding of psychological experiences that abstract metaphysical theories cannot (MacMurray, 1957). Thus, focusing simply on its internal properties is not sufficient to understanding the nature of person: stripped-down metaphysical conceptions of personhood could not be the end of the story.

We would expect to find that people's self-definition is related to their preferences for certain roles and courses of action. For instance, someone who is a prince of a certain community, understands that he is not called the prince just because of his psychological or physical attributes rather, he understands that there is a lot of meaning— his identity as the prince shows connectedness and tells the story of his social relations and his moral duties. It seems there is a

lot more to being a person than physical attributes. We seem to think that who we are is more than having a body, one's identity grounded on one's actions and attaining certain statuses. Thus, focusing simply on its internal properties is not sufficient to understand the nature of being a person. The metaphysical view suffers from an overly narrow conception and fails to appreciate fundamental practical concerns connected to our animality and social relationships (Schechtman, 2018).

This is not to deny the validity of physical attributes —metaphysical view is implied in the communal view. Because one cannot be a person in the normative communal sense unless one is already imbued with metaphysical properties. That is, one uses her descriptive biological and metaphysical features in order to satisfy the social-moral criteria, so the normative view implies the metaphysical features. I only claim that human beings cannot be fully understood in terms of metaphysical properties. It can be concluded, then, that what makes us who we are necessarily includes what we do in the social world. Personhood is composed of metaphysical properties and social elements, reflected in one's roles and relationships with others (Usborne and Taylor, 2010). Part of the reason why I have not focused on the metaphysical view alone is that focusing on the social and normative approach contributes something significant to the study.

At the heart of the Zulu normative view is my aim of contributing to the problem of the individual-community relationship. This idea of personhood as beyond the ontological conception helps one better understand the relationship between the community and the individual. Issues around the relationship between individual and community emerge in this kind of discussion. My analysis of the Zulu conception shows that one's metaphysical properties and the community are interwoven, and one cannot be conceived as isolated from the other. Accordingly, both the descriptive and the normative conceptions are essential to understanding the relationship between the individual and the community.

### **3.7. Conclusion**

We have identified three key aspects of Zulu traditional criteria of personhood. First, personhood is essentially relational and processual, not something that can be properly attributed to individuals in isolation. This belief is reflected in a fair amount of the literature about mutual recognition. Second, to be a person, one has to follow the complex social and linguistic behavioural codex of *hlonipha*. Caring and helping other individuals one shares social

space with. In this conceptualization, to be a person, one has to continue acting and behaving according to the custom of *hlonipha*. Third, personhood is attained, by stages, through responsibility and key events. There is the power of responsibility that comes with personhood. It seems that an important dimension of being a person in a full-fledged sense of the word is taking part in the ever-ongoing meta-practice of norm administration constitutive of the lifeworld of persons. These aspects are two layers: on the one hand, it reserves psychological capacities needed for norm-administration, and, on the other hand, it reserves individuality with the principle of communitarianism. Both are necessary for one's personhood development. Accordingly, we have to recognize the importance of the dual conception I am putting forward.

What could be gleaned from the above discussion is that the concept of personhood is a thick concept with both descriptive and normative components and that both components are essential for understanding personhood (Ikuenobe, 2019). We are always already caught up in relations with others, even prior to birth (Menkiti, 1984). Many aspects of one's metaphysical properties such as one's body, cognitive development and knowledge construction and intellectual capacities are not matters of choice but are determined/arise from the social and practical constraints that define one's situation and the nonvoluntary aspects of one's identity (Atkins, and Mackenzie, 2013). For instance, who we are born to—the genes and bodies that we have—matter in determining who we are, and communities make bodies and genes meaningful insofar as they determine the value of these physical traits (Barnes, 2016). Our social communities, in being the sources of our biological make-ups and giving value to our bodies and psychological capacities, play a larger role in how we come to understand the self. This is to say, metaphysical features are grounded on more basic facts, social relations: our metaphysical properties are products of our cultural orientation and our social relations (Schechtman, 2014). Therefore, it is safe to say personhood is generated from both an internal and an external perspective and consists of relationships, moral duties, roles, relationships and commitments that matter most about a person (Lindeman, 2009).

On the other hand, we are individualistic beings with inherited metaphysical properties about the self. These properties include certain special mental characteristics such as rationality, autonomy, agency and a necessarily joint set of physically instantiated properties. Psychological attributes and metaphysical attributes are part of the normative view. One's metaphysical and psychological capacities are a foundation for one to meet the social normative view. That is the community cannot do without individual autonomy, initiative, individuals'

abilities to use their talents, creativity, and ingenuity (Etieyibo, 2018). Likewise, the "In order to develop psychologically and physically as human persons typically do, it is necessary to mature in an environment that provides the proper scaffolding and social support for such development" (Schechtman, 2014, p. 112). Psychological features and physical features are dependent and grounded on cultural settings and social relations. Hence, one cannot just isolate psychological and physical features and make them a criterion for personhood similarly, one cannot treat the community as an independent prior entity from individuals as this leads to one providing an erroneous relationship between the individual and the social world. Both conceptions (the descriptive and normative) are interwoven, and they are both necessary to understand who we are as persons.



#### **4. The relationship between individual and community**

One of the pressing issues in the contemporary debate of personhood in African philosophy is the difficulty of the relationship between the community and the individual. In Gyekye's (1997) words, what brought about the problem is that on the one hand, the individual human being has worthwhile values such as autonomy and freedom, which ought to be respected by society. On the other hand, the individual needs the society and "all it makes available for the realisation of the individual's potential and for living a life that is most worthwhile" (Gyekye, 1997, p. 35). This problem leads us to discuss what autonomy is, and the problems associated with the social or collective in the debate of personhood. Shedding light on this problem is Menkiti who takes the community to be prior to the individual in the conceptualisation of personhood. This view, however, faces several problems such as, "misrepresenting the relationship by crowding out the individual, including her autonomy and freedom" (Gyekye, 1997, p. 37). In contrast to Menkiti, Gyekye (1997) argues that "the most satisfactory way to recognise the claims of both communality and individuality is to ascribe to them the status of an equal moral standing" (p. 41). Problems arise, however, when the community and individual are in conflict (Oyowe, 2014). Accordingly, one must not be persuaded by Gyekye's moderate account, which aims to establish a relation of equality between what are sometimes two mutually exclusive theses.

Often the debates between the relationship between individual and community have focused on whether or not the individual overrides the community or whether the community overrides the individual. My analysis of the Zulu conception takes a slightly different approach. It attempts to show that the debate should not be so much about which one overrides which one. Rather it should be more about focusing on whether and to what extent certain attributes of the moral agent that allows her to navigate through the social world. Accordingly, I approach the problem differently by focusing on contemporary experiences in the Zulu context. I offer some kind of explanation of how people negotiate autonomy within the constraints of relationships and social life. In other words, I focus on the practical ways individuals often respond when the community seems to impose itself and how those responses can help us better understand the relationship between individual and community.

This chapter has one main goal, which is to critically engage with the question of the relationship between individual and community. One of the primary aims of this chapter is to show how agency is a crucial part of thinking about personhood in African tradition. First, I aim to present the problem of the relationship between the community and the individual as

debated in the literature. In particular, in the next section, I sketch out Menkiti's and Gyekye's views of the relationship between individual and community, emphasising how it informs their conception of personhood. I then draw attention to some tensions these accounts face. Thereafter, in the following section, I focus on contemporary experiences within the Zulu context, e.g., *ukuthwasa* and *ilobolo*, which might constrain the autonomy of individuals and then examine how certain attributes of agents enable them to negotiate these relational and social constraints. Based on my findings, I argue that in spite of these constraints contemporary strategies seem to exist for the expression of individuality. Ultimately, my argument is that rather than focusing on the priority of the community or individuality, contemporary experiences point to various practical strategies through which individuality can be expressed even within a constraining environment.

#### **4.1. Individual vs the community: Is there a trade off?**

As indicated, a central problem in contemporary African philosophy concerns how to negotiate and resolve the relationship between the community and the individual in the conception of personhood. On the relationship between the individual and the community, Menkiti (1984) holds that in the African understanding, "the reality of the communal world takes precedence over the reality of individual life histories, whatever these may be". (p. 171). I take two points from these quotes. The first is that Menkiti seems to be pointing to some kind of hierarchy of being according to which community ranks higher than individuality. Even if one interprets the claim non-metaphysically, it still cannot be denied that he is assigning greater importance to the community relative to the individual. The second is that the priority of community has implications in moral and political matters. Where the distribution of rights and duties are concerned, Menkiti is claiming there is greater focus on the latter. Thus, leaving one with the sense that the rights are less important.

This view is echoed by Dzobo (1992) who endorses the view that the community is more important than the individual because it is a system that has been prior to one's existence and it exists to support the development and wellbeing of that very individual. Senghor (1964) also argues that "African society puts more stress on the group than on the individual, more on the solidarity than on the activity and needs of the individual, more on the communion of persons than on their autonomy" (p. 93). However, unlike Menkiti who defends the view that welfare and flourishing of the society takes precedence over individuals in the African setting, Wiredu



(2008) provides a different perspective on the relation between the community and the individual.

For Wiredu (2008), it is individuals who do the defining, using rules developed in the community. In his view, the community will set parameters, which one uses to cultivate one's identity. These parameters are kinds of conditions that are set up as the criteria of personhood that one will respond to and struggle within one's cultivation of personhood (Wiredu, 2008). According to Wiredu, one may think of the relationship between the individual and his/her social community as it relates to identity as a push/pull relationship. Wiredu (2008) postulates that there is social influence on identity from the very beginning, insofar as one's community determines the parameters of individual identity prior to his/her birth. As the individual grows, he/she might accept those parameters and attempt to work towards the social recognition of that community—he/she might construct a narrative in line with the values that his/her community has set up for him/her (Wiredu, 2008). The individual might also reject either parts or the whole of the community's values, seeking recognition from another community (Wiredu, 2008). However, at no time is a community not in some sense pressing on the individual in his/her construction of personhood. And, at no time is the individual's identity not being defined by a community's recognition that he/she desires for a positive self-image. Consequently, communities are crafting the individual as the individual is crafting him/herself to the liking of a community (Barnes, 2016). One might read Michael Eze's (2008) account of ubuntu as offering a similar understanding of the relationship between individual and community. The reason is that he says we should think of the relationship between the two as dialogical, which is similar to the symmetry Wiredu refers to. Roughly, this means that they are mutually dependent on each other rather than one being prior to the other.

Gyekye (1997) disputes Menkiti's view. In the words of Gyekye, the major problem with Menkiti (and others) is that they consider the community to be always prior to the individual (Gyekye, 1997). Defending the idea that the community always takes priority over an individual threatens certain crucial features of an individual like her autonomy and rights. I think there are good reasons for thinking that Gyekye's criticism is correct: I agree with him though not entirely for the same reasons. There is the danger in holding moral supremacy of the community over the individual. Sometimes the community's beliefs are hostile and dangerous. Prioritising community over individuality is potentially troubling because it will ultimately favour the former, and thus invariably lead to the subjugation of individual rights. This is undesirable,

reason being, it indicates that the individual must always make a way for the community. Another point of criticism, which emerges from here, is that Menkiti's view fails to emphasise the extent to which individuals exercise agency and reject communal norms and to decide, to act, for reasons of their own.

It is worth noting, as Gyekye stresses, that when things break down from the normal, we critically reflect and formulate various ways of responding to communal norms. In times where the community gets rogue, individuals do exercise autonomy, expressing an individual's talents, capacities, and identity. Individuals distance themselves, one's private preferences do not always align with the community. The point here is that the communitarian self is not always the object of an ethical community encumbered with a community's values and perception of the common good, individuals do not claim or take community's values to be absolute, but one is a choosing subject or a moral agent who can make choices and one who can change or resist (Wiredu, 2009). Individuals do exercise autonomy and use their standing in the community to bring about the shift in perception—a perception of a new common good (Ikuenobe, 2018b). Menkiti seems not to emphasize this individuality. Hence, it is not clear how one can prioritize the community over the individual when the individual plays such an important role in one's identity and the community.

For Gyekye (1997), "the most satisfactory way to recognize the claims of both communality and individuality is to ascribe to them the status of an equal moral standing" (p. 41). The individual has dual features: "as a communal being and as an autonomous, self-determining, self-assertive being with a capacity for evaluation and choice" (Gyekye, 1992, p. 113). Gyekye (2002) claims that "it is an obvious fact, of course, that an individual human being is born into an existing human society" (p. 16). That is, a person comes to know who she is in the context of relationships with others, not as an isolated, lonely star in a social galaxy (Gyekye, 1997, p. 38). However, this must not be interpreted into the error of giving priority to the community.

Gyekye (1992) commented that individuals have essential attributes such as rationality, having a moral sense and capacity for virtue and, hence, for evaluating and making moral judgements: all this means that the individual is capable of choice. These mental features give him/her the opportunity to make moral judgments. "It is not the community that creates these attributes; it discovers and nurtures them" (Gyekye, 1997, p. 53). So then, if these attributes play any seminal role in the execution of the individual person's lifestyle and projects, as indeed they do; then it

cannot be persuasively argued that personhood is fully defined by the communal structure or social relationships (Gyekye, 1997, p. 53). An individual has a role to play towards the kind of person he or she is. For Gyekye (1997), "every individual bears their own burden and is responsible for fulfilling their needs and reaching their goals" (p. 40).

Consider, for instance, the following proverbs:

1. Life is as you make it yourself.
2. It is by individual effort that we can struggle for our heads.

Gyekye (1997) argues that his views, as supported by these proverbs, express the idea that "as individuals we are responsible for our situations in life" (p. 41). This is to say, "the individual is not absorbed by the communal or cultural apparatus but can to some extent distance herself from it" (Gyekye, 1997, p. 59). Therefore, "the most that can be said, then, is that a person is only partly constituted by the community" (Gyekye, 1997, p. 59). To clarify his point, Gyekye (1992) goes on to say that the logic of communitarianism while pointing towards "overwhelming concern for communal values somehow, necessarily accommodates a balance of individual endowments and communal values" (p. 115). This is because for individuals to function in a society there has to be room for autonomy and rights. The idea is that neither can the individual develop outside the framework of the community nor can the welfare of the community as a whole dispense with the talents and initiative of its individual members (Gyekye, 1997). Accordingly, both the community and the individual have equal moral standing (Gyekye, 1997). However, Gyekye's view on the community and individual relationship has not proved popular with some philosophers.

In his attempt to discredit the Equal Moral Standing thesis, Oyowe (2013) points out that Gyekye's conception of personhood leaves unattended the potential tension that will always arise when individual human rights claims and the pressure to advance the collective good head in different directions. That is "there are instances when rights and responsibilities are in conflict" (Famakinwa, 2010a, p.71). For instance, one may think of the most basic and fundamental rights, the right to vote. This choice where citizens exercise their right to choose those who must represent them in a general election could clash with the community good; "voter's personal judgment may run contrary to the general community good" (Famakinwa, 2010b p.154). That is, "the exercise of political rights does not always serve the common good". (Famakinwa, 2010a, p.71). It is, therefore, clear that striking a balance between rights and

responsibilities is not always successful. "Because of the trade-off necessary when individual rights and collective good are in conflict, a conception of personhood that is premised on the equality of the two is pressured into judgment about which of the two is basic" (Oyowe, 2013, p. 10). That is, Gyekye's equal moral standing cannot consistently handle cases where individual claims clash with communal claims.

I agree with Oyowe and Famakinwa. Gyekye's account is fine under normal circumstances, but what he should be dealing with are the abnormal circumstances where community and individual go different ways. For instance, there are circumstances where individuality and communality come apart or are in conflict. For instance, some African communities are totally opposed to members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) communities as they believe homosexuality is not in their culture, this leads to individuals using communal practices to justify discrimination. In scenarios like this one, the communal values trump individual right to freedom and sexual expression. Even if one were to prioritise individual freedom over harmony, this would fail to capture the moral aim of achieving communal harmony, and it contradicts Gyekye's equal moral standing status. It is not possible to respect individuality while prizing the community; it is either you subordinate one at the expense of the other. That is, meeting the relevant social objective usually means overriding the right of some actual individual or vice versa (Famakinwa, 2010; Oyowe, 2013). Human rights and communal duties are diverse: they come apart the communal account is extrinsic, and it is characterised by duties and benefits whereas the conception of human right such as the right to freedom is intrinsically valuable in themselves they do not have to benefit the community (Oyowe, 2013). Thus, to speak about communal duties is not to speak of the conception of human rights; one cannot equally balance them.

A believer in Gyekye's view may point out that this critique is not plausible because Gyekye (1997) contends that "in the event of any anti-social activities by an individual, the community will have to take the steps necessary to maintain its integrity and stability" (p. 65). That is, if there is a clash between individual rights and communal responsibilities, the community will have to take steps, which are likely to involve abridging individual rights (Gyekye, 1997). As a matter of fact, the recognition of individual rights under Gyekye's moderate communitarianism is for the sake of the community, not that of the individual. For Gyekye, rights are in service of the community; rights do not occupy a special role, rather rights are given a secondary status (Matolino, 2009). Famakinwa (2010a) agrees with Matolino and

argues that Gyekye's recognition of rights is not for the sake of the individual himself or herself but for the sake of the community. This is simply because in Gyekye's (1997) words: although rights belong to the individual, their exercise have to benefit the wider community. Thus, the ideas we can take out of this is, "the communitarian ethic acknowledges the importance of individual rights, but it does not do so to the detriment of responsibilities that individual members have or ought to have toward the community or other members of the community" (Gyekye, 1997, p. 66). Thus, Gyekye's communitarianism will expectably give priority to duties rather than rights (Coetzee and Roux, 1998).

This response, however, is not plausible. On closer scrutiny, Gyekye slides into Menkiti's radical view he analysed and rejected. When Gyekye prioritises the moral supremacy of the community over individual rights he is treating rights as secondary values just as traditional communitarians do, consequently, contradicting his equal moral standing thesis (Matolino, 2009; Famakinwa, 2010a). When one reads his account, Gyekye endorses the view that community duties come first and he takes rights to occupy a lesser status. For instance, Gyekye (1997) makes it quite clear that, "moderate communitarianism will not be obsessed with rights, because it prizes the values and good of the collective (community)" (p. 65). Accordingly, Gyekye's communitarianism emphasises the supremacy of the community over the individual: the good of the community takes precedence over that of the individual. Like Menkiti's communitarianism, Gyekye places more emphasis on the importance of the community over that of the individual (Matolino, 2009). Gyekye's attempts at equal moral standing is not convincing; in the end, he prioritizes the moral protection of the community. Gyekye's way of accounting for the relationship between the individual and community does not offer a solution rather slides into the radical communal thesis (Famakinwa, 2010a). This problem of the relationship between the individual and the community is also noticeable in the proposed Zulu account.

The Zulu conception I put forward in the previous chapter may also be seen yielding similar difficulties in understanding the relationship between the individual and community. However, the proposed view does not advocate for primacy of communality over individuality or vice versa, it may be read as incompatible with autonomy or individual rights. Recall that the Zulu view of persons I presented grants individual personhood when s/he conducts himself/herself in a manner that is morally acceptable to the community. This primarily but not exclusively involves performing particular social roles and upholding certain responsibilities such as the

milestone of marriage and having children. To ensure prolongation and preservation of the life of the community individuals may be pressured to get married and to bear children soon after they get married (Mpungose, 2010). This is one of the reasons why childlessness is still not acceptable. For any Zulu to be respected and be recognized in the community he must have transmitted life to the offspring and have a proven record of managing his wives and offspring. Strictly speaking, in this case, one does not have the option of being a homosexual. The Zulu conception does not give room for homosexuality simply because homosexuality hurt the value of procreation amongst others of the community. Homosexuality neglects “life” and fails to contribute to the development and continuation of the life of the community. (This is just one example; there are many other ways in which the autonomy and rights of individuals may be constrained).

If the stability of personhood relies on social recognition and following certain kinds of norms and society granting this recognition only to those members who, at least to a certain degree, share their values and submit to their norms, it can be argued, then, that this view is incompatible with autonomy. To attain the status of personhood it seems the subject is prevented from acting on her own determination of what ought to be done. If being a person depends on you behaving in particular ways and one following certain kinds of norms that constrains you as an individual already, it narrows your options. Obedience to command and conformity to communal norms are all seen as inconsistent with autonomy. In this way, one can argue the view is incompatible with autonomy. Given that the threat of the collective on individuality (as noticeable in the African philosophical literature on personhood) can be attributed to the Zulu conception of person I presented, it is important for me to address it. In the next section, I want to explicate some of the strategies through which people in a contemporary Zulu context express their individuality even given communal constraints. Importantly, my discussion of these strategies draw on my empirical findings. Specifically, views from participants that formed part of my study.

#### **4.2. Negotiating agency within the constraints of social life**

Looking at constraining social practices of *ukuthwasa* and *ilobolo*, I want to offer some kind of explanation of how people negotiate autonomy in the context of constraints of relationships and community and social life. I anticipate that this will illuminate the understanding of the relationship between individual and community, not by stressing the priority of one over the other but instead the agency of individuals even in constraining social environments.

#### 4.2.1. *Ukuthwasa*

*Ukuthwasa* is the calling from ancestors to undergo training and become a traditional healer (Mlisa, 2009). Mlisa (2009) describes *ukuthwasa* as a ritual that invites ancestors into the life of the *ithwasana* to transform the individual from a sufferer of misfortune to a student with a new identity and then to a healer who now helps people. Unlike the Western tradition, where anyone who has a desire to become a doctor can pursue medical studies and graduate, *ukuthwasa* is not just for anyone. Nevertheless, those who undergo this process are chosen because they are considered to be gifted by their ancestors.

P2: Ancestral calling is not chosen, it chooses you. It is then up to the person to accept the calling or reject it once you have been chosen. But it also all depends, if the calling is not severe, a cow is slaughtered to put the calling on hold. So, you can talk to the ancestors and plead with them to give you time.

P4: I had the calling I think I was 17, but my mum wanted me to finish school, so she had to take me to consult an *inyanga* to help us. The *inyanga* said that we could do a ritual to appease the ancestors. The ancestors were asked to wait for me until I finished school. You can explain to them that the kid is still in school. If you want to accept your calling but your circumstances do not permit you can explain to them.

Let us treat the calling as an instance of the community imposing itself on the individual and responses of individuals as the challenge of exercising some autonomy in the face of the ancestral demand. These extracts indicate that even though one does not choose to get the calling, one has a choice to accept or reject the calling. For the individuals who choose to accept the calling, one has room to negotiate her way between exaggerated social conformity, social norms, on the one hand, and individualistic ambitions, e.g., pursuing further studies, on the other. This idea is verbalised in the statement by P4, where P4 talked her way out of the calling or found ways and reasons to justify to the ancestors why she cannot take part in the custom of *ukuthwasa* at that specific time. This suggests that given certain environmental constraints, individuals can, to some degree make choices, decide preferences and pursue personal goals. Setting and prioritising certain life tasks over others can be seen as one way of exercising agency and being autonomous. It can be seen as an individual's strategy to negotiate constraining social norms that impose themselves from without.

The idea here is not that individuals always succeed, but instead that people can and do frequently make choices. These choices are influenced by the situation, which reflects one's personal ideals and beliefs about what is likely to bring success. So, the individual is thinking or deciding for himself in accordance with his preferences, tastes, and beliefs. In fact, the individual is guided by her internal motives to a significant degree. It is not a matter of the community taking precedence over the individual as Menkiti implies. Moreover, it is certainly not the case that the individual overrides the community. The picture comes much closer to Wiredu's view that the relationship is symmetrical or Eze's view that it is dialogical. Further, once the call is accepted, the initiates undergo training, where they are trained to divine and heal people. The period of training involves the novice living with a traditional healer for an extensive period of apprenticeship with formal tuition in techniques and practices (Booi, 2014). Much of the training requires levels of discipline and conformity. This leads to some people accepting or rejecting their calling. This particular idea is verbalized by some participants.

P4: I accepted my calling, and I was required to change the way I live, I was required to wear dresses, skirts, cover my hair and stop partying and drinking. It was difficult, but I am happy with most of the things they say they really made me better because the life I lived was not right. So, I am happy that my ancestors are showing me this way. There have been many times when I have not always agreed with the messages my ancestors have provided. Things are not the same as they were before; some of the requests ancestors make one has to question because they are not possible with some the way things are today. For example, some of the places we stay in we can't burn incense because the neighbours will complain, you cannot go take a bath in these modernised public places, so some things you cannot do. But you have to update them, have conversations with them so they are aware and you propose something that is doable.

P1: There are times where they ask you to do a ceremony, for instance, slaughter a cow, like what we had to do for grandma's wedding, but you cannot due to circumstances for us it is because of lockdown restrictions, sometimes there are financial issues in other people's cases. So, in cases like this, you cannot do as they requested so you can do something small and affordable like *iladi* and tell them this is what you can afford. Ceremonies are very expensive as they involve the whole



community. If you update them they will understand. You should not ignore them because you are messing things up for yourself, bad things will follow you, little things like crime, car accidents some of them can allow that to happen to you if you ignore them.

In the context of exercising individuality in constraining social norms, these extracts suggest that individuals exercise agency, both by complying with and by resisting some requests ancestors make. One idea is worth noting here. First, because they are agents, the individual who has a calling is sometimes able to question the requests. Using the human characteristics of forethought and critical reflection, one does not simply react and agree to ancestors' requests; rather one anticipates the likely consequences of their prospective actions. So, one embraces the custom of *ukuthwasa* in part because it corresponds to who one is or the sort of person one wants to be. This is evident in P4's statement. She follows specific recommendations or commands because she feels they are in keeping with her moral code. Thus, one reflects upon and endorses these requests and preferences rather than simply accepting them unconditionally. That is, individuals have room to reflect on requests made by their ancestors and make their choices on the basis of critical reflection. The result is that one can, transform, or prioritise these requests in a way that implies that individuals are not passive bystanders. Another example is the case of the reality star Boity Thulo who accepted her calling and had to take a long break from her music career to undergo the process of *ukuthwasa*. The reality star revealed that she "Yes I did go *thwasa*, but I am not going to practise as a *sangoma*". The reality star talks about still wanting to grow in the entertainment career and wanting marriage and having a family, this could be the reason why she is not practicing as a *sangoma*.

In the above case of Boity, we see that agency is alive and well, and that it takes many forms. One of these forms is negotiating and postponing social norms/requests made by ancestors. For example, Boity chose to accept her calling but she does not practice right away as *sangomas*. She has negotiated her way between social conformity and individualistic ambitions, e.g., pursuing her career in the entertainment industry and having a family. To postpone the practicing as a *sangoma* after one has gone through *ukuthwasa* training one differs from/ pushes against the expected choices and behaviours for an individual who has a calling. Individuals, as agents, distinguish themselves from their conformist counterparts by postponing requests made by ancestors. This is evident in Boity's case. Through the decision-making process, the agent questions and reflects on relevant information and resolution and accordingly, she brings her

actions in line with the relevant information and reflection. In Boity's case, it is easy to see that she found a way to stay within the constraints but still on her own terms – that is, still expressing a significant degree of individuality. She is still pursuing her music career, she is still a celebrity in many ways, but at a point, she honoured the call but in a way that still allowed her to exercise a certain degree of individuality. Accordingly, it can be interpreted that individuals express their agency/individuality within communal structures, not in opposition to it. You are exercising your individuality/sociality within the constraints of your ancestral beliefs. That is the individual can take an objective view of the community's existing values, re-evaluate them, and initiate new ones. This idea echoes in the works of Wiredu (2008) when he says, as the individual grows, he/she might accept those parameters and construct a narrative in line with the values that his/her community has setup for him/her however, the individual might also reject either parts of the community's values. The relationship is purely dialogical. Individuals in communities are actively re-negotiating their role and presence when it comes to everyday experiences. This is evident also in the practice of *ilobolo*.

#### **4.2.2. *Ilobolo***

Payment of bride-wealth or *ilobolo* is a significant element of marriage among Zulu people. There are a number of factors that constitute marriage amongst the Zulu people. I will, however, only concentrate on one element, namely *ilobolo*. The practice of *ilobolo* is an age-old custom that involves the transfer of cattle from the prospective husband to his prospective bride's family (Dlamini, 1994). The primary purpose of *ilobolo* is to build relations between the respective families as marriage is seen as more than a union between two individuals. The custom is aimed at bringing the two families together, developing mutual respect, and establishing relationships within and between lineages (Dlamini, 1994). Accordingly, *ilobolo* is transacted between families, not individuals (Kayongo-Male and Onyango, 1984). It is a formal process and requires strict adherence to protocol, whereby the negotiations must be conducted in writing and necessitate the physical presence of both families.

Some elements of the practice have changed over time. For example, in pre-colonial days the *ilobolo* payment was in cattle/livestock; however, because of the change in time today, modern couples have switched the transfer to cash payments (Ansell, 2001). This economic shift comes with a downside: the custom gets abused and mishandled. The custom, meant to establish ties between the families of the bride and groom, has become a considerable source of income for many families, with every family member wanting a share of the bride price (Kuhlmann, 2019).

That is, over time the *ilobolo* became subject to exploitation where families undertake the practice in such a way that violates the practice; they abuse the practice by putting too much financial cost.

P1: The more educated the woman is, if she does not have a kid out of the relationship, the more the husband is expected to pay. Having the right negotiators who understand the process is essential because you (the groom) can ask your uncles to negotiate a lower price otherwise you will pay my sister.

P3: *ilobolo* is very expensive today speaking to your partner and being realistic about what you can afford is very important, she must know how much you can afford. Even though she does not have a say in the amount of money you will have to pay it is decided by the family, she can talk to her family especially her mother, the mother talks to the uncles and soften them up, remind them about the cost of living that the couple will face and they don't want that for their daughter.

P2: Your uncles have to negotiate down the number and the value of each cow. Some families are difficult, but you can beg them, buy them a gift, a nice bottle of whiskey. That is what my friend did, and it helped because at the end of the day he got a good deal.

Let us treat the process of *ilobolo* specifically where families undertake the practice in such a way that violates the practice by placing too much financial burden on prospective grooms. We can treat it as an instance of the community imposing itself on the individual and the responses of individuals as the strategies of exercising some autonomy in the face of the family's demands. These extracts indicate that even though families abuse the practice by putting too much financial cost, there is room for one to exercise individuality and create better possibilities for oneself. The individual negotiates, the negotiators find ways to steer the negotiation in a direction that benefits them; hence they are not bullied into paying an unjust price for the bride. One can lessen the demands. The respondents' statements indicate that using self-direction one is able to manipulate social forces and favourable alter the influences that one does not like. This is evident in P2's statement, where one brings a present for the father of the prospective bride, in order to decrease the *ilobolo* amount to be paid. This is also evident in P3's statement

where the woman expresses agency by grooming/talking to her parents making them aware of the individual's financial position, so one tries to persuade her parents to decrease the price.

The implication is that one has some negotiating power and influence on the decision and outcome in the process of *ilobolo*. This shows individual agency, and it shows one's capabilities to negotiate social norms and make choices and decisions and to manipulate situations to their advantage. Thus, even though the groom is not allowed to be present during the negotiation, the uncles and his prospective wife make moves to assert this man's autonomy. The individual does not bow and says yes to everything the community says, and one is not entirely rejecting what the family says. Instead, one is negotiating such that they (the community and the individual) meet halfway and find common ground. Accordingly, even though there are constraints on the individual, there seem to be strategies that they adopt within the culture that allows the individual to express agency and enforce some particular kinds of demands. This is also evident in the following statement:

P1: You have to have a good team, we hired a friend who has a strong rural background and is highly experienced with inter-cultural negotiations. We were able to agree that I will pay the *ilobolo* in installments instead of paying the full price upfront.

This suggests that there is room for one to decide within the limits of culture. P1 negotiates that the full amount of *ilobolo* does not have to be paid at once. Individuals are able to exercise a certain amount of control in and through the transaction. One does not reject the practice and do things completely in their own way. Rather, one somehow has space to exercise some kind of self-governance while still adhering best as possible to the expectations the family has. Accordingly, when individuals are constrained, they are not passive bystanders, they are very active agents in negotiating their way through those challenges/constraints and within those communal structures. Thus, an individual takes an active part in the process of generating her fundamental commitments within a certain social and cultural framework.

From the above discussion, one can deduce that when there is a tension between the community and the individual, it is not often the case that community always trumps individual or individual trumps community as it is often implied in the literature. Instead, what these empirical findings show is that there are practical ways of negotiating these tensions such that

we can think of the relationship more as dialogical or symmetrical as Wiredu says. It also as Eze (2013) claims: "The relationship between the individual and the community remains co-substantive by virtue of a creative dialogic process" (p. 395). For instance, when the *ilobolo* price is being decided upon, the ultimate decision goes through much debate, both parties get a chance to speak, reevaluate what they know, make changes and proceed up until some kind of common ground is reached. The relationship is purely dialogical. Think about water that is flowing through the crevice of a rock, as the water is flowing down from the rock there may be part of the rock where it is not smooth. However, the water does not try to break its way through those parts. Instead, it will find an open part and flow through.

Similarly, when there are limitations or social constraints, which block the individual, the individual exercises agency and looks for another way to go around. One finds strategies within these constraints to express their individuality. Those strategies do not involve rejecting the community; one's individuality comes through, but their relationship to the community is preserved. The idea is simply that if there is tension, the solution is not so much to reject the culture; the solution is to assert individuality within the boundaries of cultural expectations. It begins to look very much like what Ikuenobe says relational autonomy is, where one exercises autonomy but still within the constraint of the community.

#### **4.3. Link between empirical findings and relational autonomy**

What I find in my discussion with these participants overlaps with what Ikuenobe calls relational autonomy, which was discussed in some detail in an earlier chapter. In the empirical findings discussed above, this idea of relational autonomy is evident. It is relational to the extent that you are self-guiding but within relational structures you are not rejecting the structures, relationships, and the communal norms all together rather one is working their way within those structures. So, it is like expressing your individuality within social constraints.

Autonomy involves the community helping or guiding one to use one's ability and knowledge of one's circumstance to freely choose the requisite goods for achieving one's life plan (Ikuenobe, 2018). The community helps, guides, and provides one with options, and value systems that help one to make sense of one's choices and actions (Ikuenobe, 2015). This is supported by Wiredu (1992) when he says, "A human being deserves, ought, to be helped" (p. 202). This is simply because human beings are not self-sufficient, hence dependent on others even through growth, acquired skills and abilities one is still in one way or another, directly or

indirectly dependent on others. (Wiredu, 1992). I agree with Wiredu, we do not innately know, and usually cannot individually figure out many things on our own. We are dependent on other people for our survival. Because we are not self-sufficient and there are limits to our sole individual knowledge; therefore, there is the need for guidance that may take the form of epistemic paternalism, epistemic dependence, or deference (Ikuenobe, 2015). This idea suggests that the lack of connections with one's community involves a lack of the material conditions that will help one make free choices, develop, and flourish. This implies that one's autonomy and innate natural mental ability to make reasonable choices freely must be assisted, informed, and educated to understand the proper context (Ikuenobe, 2018).

Relational autonomy is making the point that you do not have the option to reject the community altogether. This is simply because our autonomy is shaped, constrained, and limited by the relationships in which we are, and have been, engaged (Mackenzie and Stoljar, 2000). However, individuals as autonomous agents still can have reasons of their own for adopting beliefs that go beyond, and so transform, this social background or the community (Bevir, 1996). That is individuals are not mere functions of a social structure; rather they are agents who are capable of extending and modifying the heritage of the community into which they are born: they can reflect on the social structures they inherit, and they can elect to act in ways which might transform their community beyond all recognition (Wiredu, 2008). So, the idea of autonomy which defines one's agency in this idea of personhood is a social-relational phenomenon; one can still be self-guided relationally.

A critic may point out that autonomous action should spring from the self. That is, it is not clear how one is autonomous when this autonomy and exercising of agency revolves around socialisation/external factors. The self and the exercise of agency often appears to be the product of external influences. This causes an inescapable tension in determining how an act is to be considered autonomous. For instance, with the custom of *ilobolo* it is not clear how the individual is acting autonomously; it seems one is conforming to traditional societal norms, which pressure women to marry at a certain stage. So, individuals who agree to the custom is a sign of internalised oppression, that it is accepted as a norm that the individual must be married at a particular stage of her lifetime to carry the family name forward (Posel and Rudwick, 2014). Accordingly, it is not clear how one is autonomous when they are acting based on social standards and not acting based on their own individual preferences. That is, it is not clear how one is autonomous when all of our values, preferences and desires are influenced by our

families, friends, peers, what sort of autonomy is it? Rather it seems, societies reinforce, on a daily basis, batterers' power over individuals, undermining one's agency and freedom. The idea of autonomy, which enables the individual to choose his goals, actions, and life plans, as Gyekye (1997) argues, must derive in an internalist sense solely from one's own rational will, and it cannot be guided in an externalist sense by moral principles or social commitments.

Here is a possible response. To be a practical notion, autonomy must allow that a person is able to incorporate external influences into her determination of action, rather than requiring complete detachment from them. While I agree with Gyekye on his emphasis on individuality, I do not share the optimism for the idea that social factors should not guide autonomy. Individualistic understanding of autonomy is both insufficient to capture the breadth of human interests and agency and inconsistent with other important values. Autonomy is made possible and maintained only through forms of dependence and interaction with others. Autonomous agents can only learn to be autonomous within a social setting (Ikuenobe, 2016). We need to be assisted by family and friends if we are to be truly autonomous persons. That is, we become autonomous through the enabling actions and support of others. "No matter how far we push our concepts back, we cannot reach a state of nature, a realm of pure reason, an existential freedom where individuals operate outside of, and so unaffected by, particular social contexts" (Bevir, 1996, p. 8). Thus, the view that autonomy is independent of social context or socialisation is incompatible with autonomy. Simply "because it is committed to an unrealistic conception of autonomy", a conception that agents are the ultimate source of their pro-attitudes (Barclay, 2000, p. 55). Many of our values are influenced by social forces. One may, in fact, question whether there are any human values that are not the product of socialisation. Therefore, if autonomy exists at all, it must develop from within social systems of interaction with others for the autonomous human is inescapably constituted through relational networks. However, this must not be interpreted into the error of saying the individual must always align one's private preferences to social relationships. Moreover, it must not be interpreted as suggesting that because autonomy is dependent on sociality one must accept everything the community says. As the cases above show, individuals can exert some individuality within social and cultural constraints, rather simply acquiesce to them.

#### **4.4. Conclusion**

This traditional Zulu conception reveals something that people in the debate have not paid attention to and that it is adding something to the debate that helps us answer a certain question.

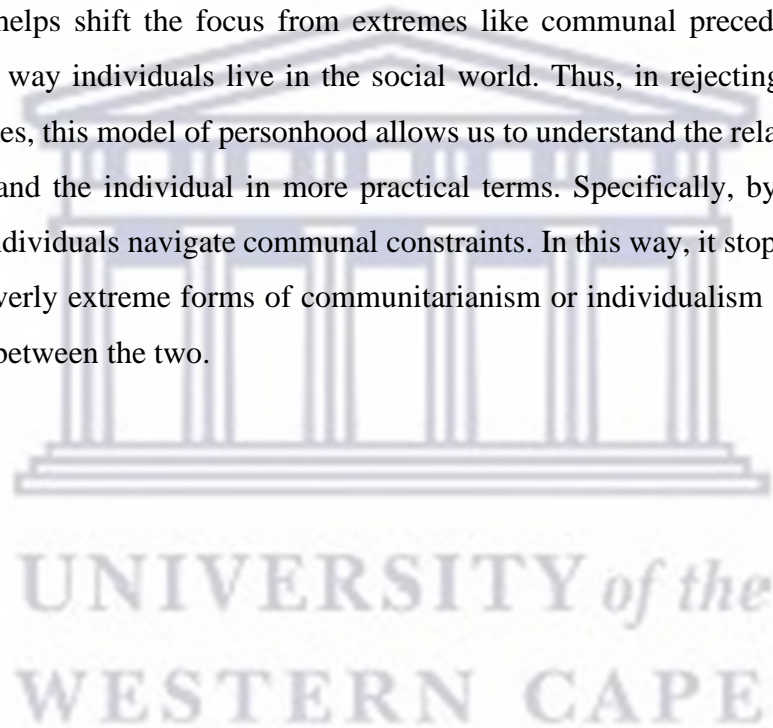
My analysis of the respondents' data shows that the debate on the relationship between the individual and community should not be so much about which one overrides which one. It is not helpful to talk about the community or the individual overriding the other, these two extreme positions are just too complicated and not helpful. Rather it is more helpful to focus on certain attributes of the agent that allows her to navigate through the social world. One has the capacities such as rationality, reflection, one has the ability to prioritise, resist, reject and manipulate constraining social situations to their advantage. Using these capacities, agents exhibit individuality/autonomy and effectively direct their lives in the face of pervasive social influence, especially oppressive socialisation. That is, in the real world what happens is, for the most part human beings live their lives in community as if the community dictates everything, when things are going well the community can be positive influence, but there are times where things go really bad and people begin to exercise their agency, their autonomy relative to certain aspects of the community that they find oppressive. In the middle of all these challenges individuality still comes through in some way. The empirical findings have shown this. My findings show that even though there are constraints on individuals there seem to be strategies that they adopt to somehow work within those constraints. There are not altogether passive; they are active agents working within those communal structures.

The individual and the community are not radically opposed in the sense of priority but engaged in a contemporaneous formation (Eze, 2013). That is, we cannot really work with the extremes, we can find some middle ground where the individuals are somehow, neither rejecting the community altogether but neither asserting their individuality such a way that they are not guided by the community, some kind of a middle ground there. It is not equal per se, rather it is more like, I exercise my agency, sometimes my interests will give way for the communal interests sometimes the communal interests will give way for my interests, and then we find a middle ground in practical ways like that. "To adjust the interests of the individual to those of the community is not to subordinate one to the other" (Wiredu, 2008, p. 334). This relationship sounds dialogical. "The relationship between the individual and community is dialogical for the identity of the individual, and the community is dependent on this constitutive formation" (Eze, 2013, p. 386). In this paper, while I do not debunk the role of communities in facilitating the good of the individual, the community in my view, is not prior to the individual and the latter does not pre-exist the community. "To argue that the community pre-exists the individual is to argue that we can indeed have a community without a person for the community is necessarily constituted by persons and, to argue that an individual pre-exists the community is ontologically



contradictory for a person is necessarily a social subjective" (Eze, 2013, p. 329). No community exists in a vacuum. At the same time, however, an individual's subjectivity is necessarily located and actualised within a community. The individual is not prior to the community, and neither is the community prior to the individual. The identity of the community and the individual is given essence in terms of such trivially inter-subjective formations (Eze, 2013).

My intervention in the individual community relationship controversy is to neither affirm the priority of the community or individual over the other but focus on contemporary strategies for exercising individual agency within communal constraints. We should focus on attributes of the person like agency, rationality and free choice that allows them to navigate several obstacles. This helps shift the focus from extremes like communal precedent or individual precedent to the way individuals live in the social world. Thus, in rejecting the tendency to adopt the extremes, this model of personhood allows us to understand the relationship between the community and the individual in more practical terms. Specifically, by focusing on the practical ways individuals navigate communal constraints. In this way, it stops short of forcing us to embrace overly extreme forms of communitarianism or individualism when it comes to the relationship between the two.



## 5. Conclusion

One of the main themes that run throughout the entire dissertation concerns the relationship between metaphysical and practical aspects (i.e., communal, normative, socio-moral etc.) of personhood. This is most evident in the first chapter. There, I began by explicating the different African conceptions of persons (metaphysical and normative) and sought to show that the best conception is the social normative approach, but one which does not demarcate sharply between the metaphysical and normative approach. In other words, the normative aspects of personhood depend on the metaphysical features. I have provided several considerations against the metaphysical as presented in the works of, Kwame Gyekye and Kwasi Wiredu and Segun Gbadegesin. I have argued that the social normative which goes beyond metaphysical properties and requires individuals to abide by communal standards in order to be recognized as persons is more plausible. The normative view, however, is criticized by Matolino. Matolino (2014) rejects the normative communitarian approach because of its inherent category mistake. The Afro-communitarian's mistake is that she locates persons in the "socio-moral" category rather than the metaphysical category (Matolino, 2014). According to him, the communitarian thesis is not apt to answer matters of strict ontological identity and needs to be limited to the socio-ethical arena.

These two categories come apart. In response to this charge, Oyowe (2015) posits that properties like moral agency and sociality (communality) are not features that "persons could not have" (p. 509). In fact, for Oyowe, it is perfectly conceivable for persons to be communal in nature. In other words, a category mistake has not been committed because moral agency and communality are features persons could have. Following Oyowe, I disagreed with Matolino and argued that one cannot advocate a complete separation between the metaphysics and socio-moral aspects of persons simply because these conceptions are related and not mutually exclusive as Matolino assumes. Matolino fails to see that the normative view is coming from a very key assumption, a central assumption that metaphysics and practical issues are deeply connected. It is hard to separate them. The grounding of our practical concerns requires psychological and metaphysical characteristics<sup>11</sup>. There is a strong relationship between metaphysics and practical issues. When people think metaphysically, they are also thinking practically.

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<sup>11</sup> See Shoemaker, 2005

For instance, in answering the question of personal identity, Locke is also concerned with practical issues around the afterlife. There is wide agreement that Locke's theory of personal identity is meant to complement his moral and theological commitments to a system of divine punishment and reward in an afterlife. One of the most obvious and important motives for Locke's scholarship was to provide an account of personal identity that would make sense of the Christian doctrines of human immortality, the resurrection of the dead, and the Last Judgement (Noonan, 2004). Another example, Locke is usually understood as offering a theory of what makes a person at a given time identical to a person at some future time (Thiel, 2011). However, Locke does seem to be concerned with personal identity as a matter which deals with questions such as, what a person is morally and legally responsible for<sup>12</sup>. Metaphysical questions around personal identity are used in a variety of legal contexts for a variety of purposes such as they answer to practical questions about the law; they help to provide a response to determining criminal responsibility. It is not about just having intrinsic features which they use to define the metaphysical account it is about how those intrinsic features are related to the social world in the case of persons. The point I am making here is simply that in answering the question of personal identity which is a metaphysical question he is answering the question of how we should organize our justice system which is a practical question; he is concerned about important practical issues which are strongly connected to metaphysical ones<sup>13</sup>.

Accordingly, I argued one cannot separate between the normative and metaphysical. Physical features are grounded on more basic facts, cultural settings and social relations and they need to be seen within a context that can provide their full significance (Adeofe, 2004). I have argued, even at the level of metaphysics, persons are shown to be social – or relational; we cannot understand persons independently of their environment as Matolino assumes. Although psychological continuity theories seem intuitively plausible, much of this plausibility derives from our practical interests in personhood (Schechtman, 1996). My discussions defending the normative view of personhood are further highlighted and clearly supported and linked in the Zulu conception of personhood I propose in Chapter 3.

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<sup>12</sup> Strawson (2014) insists that Locke is concerned with a different question of personal identity—the question of what a person is morally and legally responsible for.

<sup>13</sup> I am not arguing that Locke's view provides a plausible explanation to the question of personal identity and practical concerns. Rather I am simply pointing out that when defining the individualistic metaphysical criteria, he is also answering practical social questions.

In the second chapter, I sought to critically explore the Zulu people's cultural, linguistic and normative resources in understanding what it means to be a person. Through a brief overview of Zulu history and tradition and by synthesizing the empirical data collected during the course of this study, this chapter sought to investigate and articulate the Zulu conception of personhood. We have identified three key aspects of Zulu traditional criteria of personhood. First, personhood is essentially relational and processual, not something that can be properly attributed to individuals in isolation. This belief is reflected in a fair amount of the literature about mutual recognition. Second, to be a person, one has to follow the complex social and linguistic behavioural codex of *hlonipha*, Care and helping other individuals one share social space with. Third, personhood is attained, by stages, through responsibility and key events. These aspects are two 'layers': on the one hand, it reserves psychological capacities needed for norm-administration, and, on the other hand, it reserves individuality with the principle of communitarianism. Both are necessary for the development of one's personhood. Thus, the crucial aspect of chapter three is my contention that the concept of personhood is a thick concept with both descriptive (i.e., metaphysical) and normative (including socio-moral) components and that both components are essential for understanding personhood (Ikuenobe, 2019).

I have sought to show that being a person is not just about having intrinsic features which some scholars use to define the metaphysical account; rather it is about how these intrinsic features are related to the social world in the case of persons. To say that something is a person is to tell us something about what it can do. It is hard to escape the point that interacting/participation in society makes us what we are (persons) (Schechtman, 2014); who we are is a matter of what we choose to do and how we choose to invest in what we do (Taylor, 2010). Therefore, it is safe to say that no individualistic metaphysical account alone is sufficient for personhood. This is not to deny the validity of physical attributes —metaphysical view is implied in the communal view. Because one cannot be a person in the normative communal sense unless one is already indulged with metaphysical properties. That is, one uses her descriptive biological and metaphysical features in order to satisfy the social-moral criteria, so the normative view implies the metaphysical features. These metaphysical and psychological capacities are a foundation for one to meet the social normative view.

However, part of what it means for a being to exist is to interact with its environment (Schechtman, 2014). The metaphysical fact of identity is completely dependent on

practical/social tools to develop —many aspects of one’s metaphysical properties are not matters of choice but arise from practical constraints. This suggests that metaphysical and practical questions about personhood are inherently linked (Schechtman, 2010). Accordingly, I argued personhood is generated from both an internal and an external perspective and consists of relationships, moral duties, roles, relationships and commitments that matter most about a person (Lindeman, 2009). Both conceptions (the descriptive and normative) are interwoven, and they are both necessary to understand who we are as persons. My discussion on personhood as generated from both the metaphysical and the social normative in this chapter dovetails nicely with the issues that occupy my attention in chapter four in which I explored the relationship between the community and the individual with focus on agency and relational autonomy.

In Chapter four, I explored the question of what the appropriate relationship should be between individual and community. On the relationship between the individual and the community, Menkiti (1984) seems to be pointing to some kind of hierarchy of being according to which community ranks higher than individuality. However, Menkiti has not been without his critics. Gyekye (1997) argues that defending the idea that the community always takes priority over an individual threatens certain crucial features of an individual like her autonomy and rights. For Gyekye, (1997) "the most satisfactory way to recognize the claims of both communality and individuality is to ascribe to them the status of an equal moral standing" (p. 41). However, Oyowe (2013) and Famakinwa (2010) bring to light that Gyekye’s characterization of the individual/community relationship leaves unattended the potential tension that will always arise when individual human rights claims and the pressure to advance the collective good head in different directions. However, Gyekye’s biggest weakness, as exposed by Matolino (2009) and Famakinwa (2010), is that Gyekye ultimately commits the same side of the debate as the radicals who hold moral supremacy of the community over the individual. The crucial aspect of chapter four is my contention that the debate on the relationship between the individual and community should not be so much about which one overrides which one. Instead, it is more helpful to focus on certain attributes of the agent that allows her to navigate through the social world. Drawing on empirical findings, I argued that contemporary experiences point to various practical strategies through which individuality can be expressed even within a constraining environment.

One of the primary aims of this chapter was to show how agency is a crucial part of thinking about personhood in the African tradition. Looking at constraining social practices of *ukuthwasa* and *ilobolo*, I have offered some kind of explanation of how people negotiate autonomy in the context of constraints of relationships and community and social life. I have noted that there are practical ways individuals often respond when the community seems to impose itself, and these help us better understand the relationship between individual and community. One has the capacities and internal tools such as rationality, reflection; one has the ability to prioritize, resist, reject and manipulate constraining social situations to their advantage. Using these strategies, agents exhibit individuality/autonomy and effectively direct their lives in the face of pervasive social influence, especially oppressive socialization. What begins to emerge here is that one uses their metaphysical properties to navigate everyday social/practical experiences— internal metaphysical capacities integrate into one's practical broader social life. That is, metaphysical properties and social practical resources have a deep interconnection.

I notably argued that empirical findings indicate that the individuals have room to negotiate their way between exaggerated social conformity, social norms, on the one hand, and individualistic ambitions. One reflects upon and endorses requests made by the community, the individual does not bow and says yes to everything the community says, and one is not entirely rejecting what the community says. When the community becomes oppressive, the individual has internal resources to navigate; she has internal tools of agency she can reason, she can sometimes challenge, correct the community and reform the community. Hence, I argued that when individuals are constrained, they are not passive bystanders; they are very active agents in negotiating their way in those challenges/ constraints within those communal structures. One adopts certain strategies within the culture that allow the individual to express agency while still adhering best to the expectations the community has. We are not going to the extreme that the individual takes over the community rather, when one navigates one creates a better world in which he himself becomes part of that community. So we are avoiding the extremes by focusing on the internal tools that allow one to navigate. Thus, I argued that one is negotiating such that they (the community and the individual) meet halfway and find common ground.

I further argued it is not a matter of the community taking precedence over the individual as Menkiti implies. Moreover, it is certainly not the case that the individual overrides the community. My empirical findings indicated very strongly that when there is a tension between

the community and the individual, it is not often the case that community always triumphs individual or individual triumphs community as one finds in the literature. Instead, what these empirical findings show is that there are practical ways of negotiating these tensions such that we can think of the relationship more as dialogical or symmetrical as Wiredu says. According to Wiredu, one may think of the relationship between the individual and his/her social community as it relates to identity as a push/pull relationship. In other words, I exercise my agency, sometimes my interests will give way for the communal interests sometimes the communal interests will give way for my interests, and then we find a middle ground in practical ways. A similar point is made by Eze. I argued that the individual and the community are not radically opposed in the sense of priority but engaged in a contemporaneous formation (Eze, 2013). The individual is not prior to the community, and neither is the community prior to the individual. That is, we cannot really work with the extremes, we can find some middle ground where the individuals are somehow, neither rejecting the community altogether but neither asserting their individuality such a way that they are not guided by the community. In this sense, the relationship is purely dialogical as Eze proposes.

Towards the end of the chapter, I have argued that my discussion with these participants overlaps with what Ikenobe calls relational autonomy. The reason is that one is self-guiding, but within relational structures, you are not rejecting the structures, relationships, and the communal norms altogether; rather, one is working their way within those structures. Relational autonomy is like a middle way between the community and the individual. So, it is like expressing your individuality within the social constraints. This idea of relational autonomy would be a central area of future research. This study should be able to articulate whether or not relational autonomy is a plausible idea. For instance, it should indicate whether one can exercise autonomy without and outside the influence of the community. This recommended area of future research I believe, will contribute to the debate on personhood. Particularly, it will also answer the questions of the relationship between metaphysical and social normative approaches of personhood and the relationship between the individual and the community.

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