

AFRICAN RELATIONAL CONCEPTION OF PERSON AS COROLLARY OF SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS

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Abstract:

Apart from being the condition for self-identity, person is also the prerequisite for the community of selves in I – Thou relationship. This relational disposition is both horizontal and vertical. In summary, *person* is a triad of focal, horizontal and vertical relations. Focal relation consists in self-identity, horizontal relation is expression of I –thou and I-it, and vertical relation is a transcendent, limitless disposition, beyond the fringes of the self.

Africana Ontology is all-inclusive – *Ubuntu* (humanity) and *Ubuntu* (thingness) which are resolved in *Ubuntu* (Being). While the first *Ubuntu* consists of I, Thou and We reality made up of *bantu*, the second is the non-human realm, made up of things - *bintu*. This relational orientation consists in the harmony of the three instances of *Ubuntu*. In this stead, *Ubuntu consciousness* balances human needs with those of other forms of reality, on the basis of the transcendent – God – through the living dead, ancestors and spirits.

Key Words: *Person, Self-Consciousness, Transcendent, Ubuntu*

I. Introduction

Being a non-natural phenomenon, *person* isn't subject matter for science – be it natural or social – whose *material objectis* empirical and positive – understood within the space-time continuum. *Person* is something other than physical, empirical, mental, and epiphenomenal reality. It is, in other words, a non-substantive, non-dimensional reality. *Person* is, rather, a condition for the possibility of something *x* – in this case – the condition for the possibility of relation. This condition consists in the bifurcation of *I* and *self*, *I* and *Other*, and *subject* and *object*. The reflection at hand is akin to Kierkegaard's dynamic, dialectical self as “an established relation that relates itself to itself and in relating itself to itself relates itself to another” thus becoming a positive third *self*.¹ *Person* in this paper is akin to Kant's *I think* or *transcendental unity of consciousness* that accompanies all representations in knowledge.²

From an individualistic world-view, *person* is a centripetal-focal point of reference. According to the communitarian approach, on the other hand, *person* is relational – a centrifugal, focal point of reference. In this regard Tempels held that *muntu* is always, “in a relation of being to being with God, with his clan brethren, with his family and with his descendants. *Muntu* (person) is in a similar ontological relationship with his patrimony, his land and with all that produces, with all that grows or lives on it.”³

Person as relational, is dyadic, two dimensional reality – with horizontal (social) and vertical (transcendent) aspects. Horizontally, person is directed towards other persons and things. Vertically, person tends outwardly, away from self, other persons and things – transcending the psychological, physical, and empirical realms. In this respect, *person* is self-transcending consciousness – disposed to pop beyond self.

Ubuntu thought has had a lot of contributors since it was reawakened in South Africa more than two decades ago. It, therefore, follows that the paper at hand is not ground-breaking one; it is a mere contribution to the

¹Mackenzie, p. 34.

²Kant; p. 246.

³Tempels, p. 66.

on-going debate on the rich and complex reality of *Ubuntu*, which is a “fundamental ontological and epistemological category in African thought of the Bantu-speaking people”.⁴

The paper re-emphasizes the important role of *Ubuntu* consciousness in human life. It is peculiar in two respects, as it demonstrates how self-consciousness or simply *self*, here equated with person, is a prerequisite for relation. Another novelty consists in the realization and practice of self-consciousness which can contribute to harmonious, human living, based on the indispensable inter-relationships within reality as a whole.⁵

The paper discusses horizontal (social Consciousness) dimension – relation with selves other than self (living and dead), and with *it*, i.e. the category of things. It also reflects on the vertical (transcendent consciousness) which is a supra-natural relation.

II. Social Consciousness

Self-consciousness is the condition for sociality. In this case, person notices *Other* as a necessary corollary of her/his being. Sociability is, therefore, contra Durkheim, dependent on self-consciousness.⁶ It is construction of an a priori dichotomy of *I – Thou*, contra-positing of self-consciousness in a relational manner. Two or more individual self-consciousnesses dialectically establish a collective-self-consciousness. To use Hegelian model of thought, the *I*, i.e. the *self*, is a thesis, the *Thou*, an antithesis, and the *We*, a synthesis. In a further triad, the *We* is the thesis, the *It*, the antithesis, and Being is the synthesis. In this respect, *Ubuntu* is three-dimensional reality – onto-triadic in structure – to borrow Ramose’s terminology of the three levels of human existence⁷ – living, dead, and yet to be born – which in the *Masaba* ontological triad of *Ubundu* (humanity) contra-posed against *Ubundu* (thingness), and resolved in *Ubundu* (Being). This is similar to Negesh and Saranya’s triad expressing three forms of human existence: *Umwelt* (the physical and biological reality), *Mitwelt* (existence of relation with other persons), and *Eigenwelt* (self-consciousness).⁸ In relation to this Forster states,

Thus, my identity is fundamentally related to higher and lower levels of life, to other humans, and to my own interior life. Moreover, since identity is relational, it emerges out of an active engagement with the whole of the Kosmos, it is not just an observation of either subjective or objective data, rather it is an active, inter-subjective, element of being in harmony with all other being.⁹

In traditional Africa, the individual exists corporately – communally. S/he depends, for existence, on the community, which includes past, present, and future generations. Community makes, creates, and produces the individual – for the individual depends on the group – as J. Nyasani put it,

“my own individual life-force is not mine by right or by nature but a gratuitous conferment from the *ex post facto* reality of those who already enjoyed it and who jealously safeguard it for purpose of continuity, social cohesion, social harmony, social and physical integrity and for realizing the teleological good of human existence the *mitsein* (being-with) in perpetual communion and perpetual vitality.”¹⁰

Accordingly, *person* realizes oneself through community, not always by birth, as some individuals fail to acquire it. In relation to this, Mbiti says that “Physical birth is not enough; the child must go through rites of incorporation so that it becomes fully integrated into the entire society. These rites continue throughout the physical life of the person during which the individual passes from one stage of corporate existence to another.”¹¹ Whereas the individual tree can grow in a lonely place in isolation from other trees and thus without any relationship with them or assistance from them, an individual human person cannot develop and achieve the fullness of his/her potentials without relating with other individual persons in community.

Priority of the individual makes relationships between persons merely contingent, voluntary and optional. This may not yield or lead to the emergence of a community, which however is a necessary basis not only for defining and articulating the values and goals shareable by individual persons but also for realizing the nature and

⁴Ramose, 271.

⁵ Cf. Barresi, p. 3.

⁶ Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method*.

⁷Ramose, p. 278.

⁸Negesh and Saranya, p. 113.

⁹ Forster, p. 14.

¹⁰ Nyasani, p. 53.

¹¹Mbiti, p. 108.

possibilities of the individual person. The community alone constitutes the context, the social or cultural space, in which the actualization of possibilities of the individual person can take place, providing the individual person the opportunity to express his individuality, to acquire and develop his personality and to fully become the kind of person he wants to be, that is, to attain status, goals, and expectations.

This is so far as the cultural community constitutes the context or medium in which the individual person works out and chooses his goals and plans; and through these activities, ultimately becomes what he wants to be – the sort of status he wants to acquire – the cultural community must be held as prior to the individual.

Nkafu explains that, “the meaning of an individual’s life is found in and through his relationship with the Other or Others.”¹² The strong interaction in community brings in the notion of corporate life. So the person has to immerse him/herself in the community in order to participate and possibly assume it. This is summarized in Mbiti’s “I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am”.¹³

The person is understood in the context of relationships; that is in two dimensions; relationship with human beings – the living and the dead, on one hand, and God, spirits, on the other. Person continuously interacts with the visible and invisible realms. Okoko holds that man is the centre or focal point of the universe. The present generation living on earth is the centre of all humanity including the dead.”¹⁴ According to Tempels person “finds himself to be a sovereign vital force, ruling the land and all that lives on it: man, animals and plants.”¹⁵

III. Social Consciousness of Participation

Person has to contribute to the life of the community as community contributes to him/her. It is a symbiotic relationship, as Nyerere observed, “... everybody was a worker; I do not use the word ‘worker’ simply as opposed to ‘employer’ but also as opposed to loiterer or idler.”¹⁶ Here Nyerere emphasizes that it was unknown in traditional society to accept the hospitality of the society as a right but give nothing in return. It is through participation in the community that one can develop his/her well-being, identity and potential.

As participatory, a person is open to others – which humanizes a person. Mbiti writes, “Only in terms of other people does the individual become conscious of his own being, his own duties, his privileges and responsibilities towards himself and towards other people.”¹⁷ Hence the achievement of one person in a group is taken as group achievement and vice versa. When we are open to others we discover ourselves as Buber put it thus, “The notion of a person is essentially relational. I make myself into the person I choose to be by relating to a Thou who stands over and against me.”¹⁸

IV. Social Consciousness in Individuality

In traditional African individual is acknowledged as an active member of. Community. Agulanna argues that “while emphasizing the corporate nature of human existence, it does not by that token deny individual liberty or the idea of every human being as both unique and important.”¹⁹ Individual persons are participants in the shared values and practices – as they are enmeshed in the web of communal relationships. The individual may affirm, amend or refine existing communal goals, values and practices and at times even reject them. This means a person cannot be absorbed by the communal or cultural apparatus passively, but can wriggle out of it, distance oneself from it and have another look at it. Therefore person participates in the self-determination or definition of his/her own identity.

Nyerere points out that, “In our traditional African society we were individuals within the community.”²⁰ In this case the individual is always conceived as an individual in the community. The role of the community is not to submerge the individual. The community is there for the sake of the individual. The logic here is that there is community because there are individuals who make it and there are individuals because there is community from which they come. Mbiti asserts that ‘we are’ presumes prior recognition of the individuality of those making up *We*.

¹²Nkafu, 111.

¹³ Mbiti, pp. 108f.

¹⁴ Okoko, p. 250.

¹⁵ Tempels, p. 42.

¹⁶ Nyerere, p. 5.

¹⁷ Mbiti, p. 108.

¹⁸ Buber, p. 24

¹⁹ Agulanna, p. 288.

²⁰ Nyerere, p. 6.

It is impossible to imagine the existence of an empty human society. To have a community you must first have existing individual persons. Therefore, the person is immersed in the community and nevertheless emerges from it as an individual person. Gyekye critiques Menkiti's view that *person* in Africa is secondary to community; stressing that person, among the Akan of Ghana, is an individual, independent and prior to community, with rights and duties, as much as s/he is a relational – communal entity.²¹ There is, therefore, mutual relationship between person and community. "Just as the community does not have a life of its own ontologically, so has the individual person no life of his/her own socially."²²

Mbiti holds that, one of the main features of an African tribe, people, society or nation is that, "A person that has to be born a member of it, and he cannot change tribal membership."²³ This situates a person as an individual in that particular community. He/she exists in the community as a concrete human being and is connected with his/her tribe for the purpose of identification. In this line he observes that genealogies are used to link individual persons with the other individuals in a given group.²⁴

V. Ancestor- Consciousness

Among the Bantu death is seen as a passage of *muntu* from the physical, visible, to the ancestral realm. Person attains a new status of ancestor, and is looked upon by the living for assistance in times of suffering, since, as Temples they are believed to have more vital force than the living according to the hierarchy of this principle of life.²⁵ An ancestor is, according to Mbiti, a source of life especially to his/her descendants. He/she is part of the family and must therefore be kept in touch with surviving relatives.²⁶ Belonging and solidarity to the tribe therefore implies a participation in the vital force of the ancestors.

Ancestors are conscience for the living persons in the community. They are displeased by errors and misfortunes of the individuals in the community. They are guardians of traditions, including wisdom of the community. If any person doesn't orient one's life according to traditional norms, s/he is seen as unsound, mentally.

In order to maintain harmony one is required to respect reality as whole be it the seen (humans and nature) and the unseen (ancestors and spiritual beings – including God). Sometimes it is necessary to re-establish equilibrium in society through rituals – libation and/or prayer – to ancestors and the spiritual realm.²⁷

VI. Thing (I – It) Consciousness

Relation with the physical world is possible because person is capable of going out of him/herself in order to relate with it – as it shares the common vital force which can be tapped. Mbiti argues that "African ontology is firmly anthropocentric, and this makes man look at God and nature from the point of his relationship with them." A person is therefore a being with physical reality through vital force.

Kanyike expounds as follows; "man is probative towards things and toward others. He is like a thing for itself (relation of concern) of Sartre, which tends to annihilate the 'thing in itself' (indifference); things and others are hereby seen as being for me."²⁸ Man being a 'being with' in order to live according to his/her nature has to participate in the vital force of things/beings or other persons. The fact that the person is surrounded by the physical world, she/he has to be in constant relationship with it.

Person has the capacity to relate with animals and plants as well. For Nkafu all living beings have a vital force and all individuals participate in the vital force which is the principle of life and is the first reality which God created. It is this force which nourishes life in its many forms.²⁹

Plants play a very important role in human life. One can tap the vital force of some plants for medicine. In so doing he/she increases his/her vital force. Some plants can be used to harm other people. This relationship is not appreciated and is considered evil – witchcraft. The relationship with animals also varies. Some animals are special

²¹ Gyekye, "Person and Community in African Thought "

²² Ibid. p. 4.

²³ Mbiti, p. 104.

²⁴ Mbiti, p. 105.

²⁵ Tempels, p. 102.

²⁶ Mbiti, p. 8.

²⁷ Forster, p. 13.

²⁸ Kanyike, p. 80.

²⁹ Nkafu, pp. 14f.

and honorable– whose vital force is manipulable for the good of people. Others, being harmful, are manipulated to harm people.

Transcendence Consciousness

According to Mbiti a person is capable of transcending him/herself in order to communicate with supra-sensible realities.³⁰ Dupre writes; “It is the nature of the self to be always more than itself ... to be a human person fully means to self-transcend toward the infinite.”³¹ It means one’s being is limitless in disposition.

This relation with transcendent reality is an experiential – *raison d’être* of this world – the ultimate cause of things. Person is linked to God ontologically, through vital force. “He is personally involved in his creation so that it is not outside of Him or His reach. God is simultaneously transcendent and immanent.”³²

Human beings tend to stretch beyond nature – i.e. peer beyond the natural realm – thus supra-natural. It is this sphere that would refer to as the Divine or God. For the African, in this case, God is the origin and sustainer of all things. “God has a personality and in this personality there is a will which governs the universe and the life of mankind.”³³ Person relates with God as his creator. This is expressed in prayers and invocation where God is addressed as creator. The relationship with God is both transcendent and immanent. Through prayers a person participates in the life of God, the vital force par excellence.

Person is always searching for more being, more life more vital force, where religion is a vehicle for participation in this life of God. Mbiti holds that; “a person cannot detach himself from the religion of his group, for to do so is to be severed from his roots, his foundation, his context of security, his kinships and the entire group of those who make him aware of his existence.”³⁴ Therefore person collectively encounters transcendence through religion.

VII. CONCLUSION

The paper has expounded the notion of the person, illuminating the fact that person is relational. This means person is open to other persons and other beings and the infinite. It implies that person is self-transcendent. Person is, therefore, a multifaceted and complex entity - finding meaning, identity and fulfilment in the relation with other persons and his/her environment, on one hand, and with the transcendent, on the other hand.

Individualism inspired by Descartes’ *cogito, ergo sum*, espoused by contemporary Western life-styles, and now trending in Africa, is contrary to the African foundational idea of *Ubuntu*. In conclusion, relational consciousness exhibited in *Ubuntu* can contribute to human sanity in Africa and beyond.

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³⁰ Mbiti, pp. 32ff.

³¹ Dupre, p. 107.

³² Mbiti, p. 29.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

³⁴ Mbiti, p. 2.

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