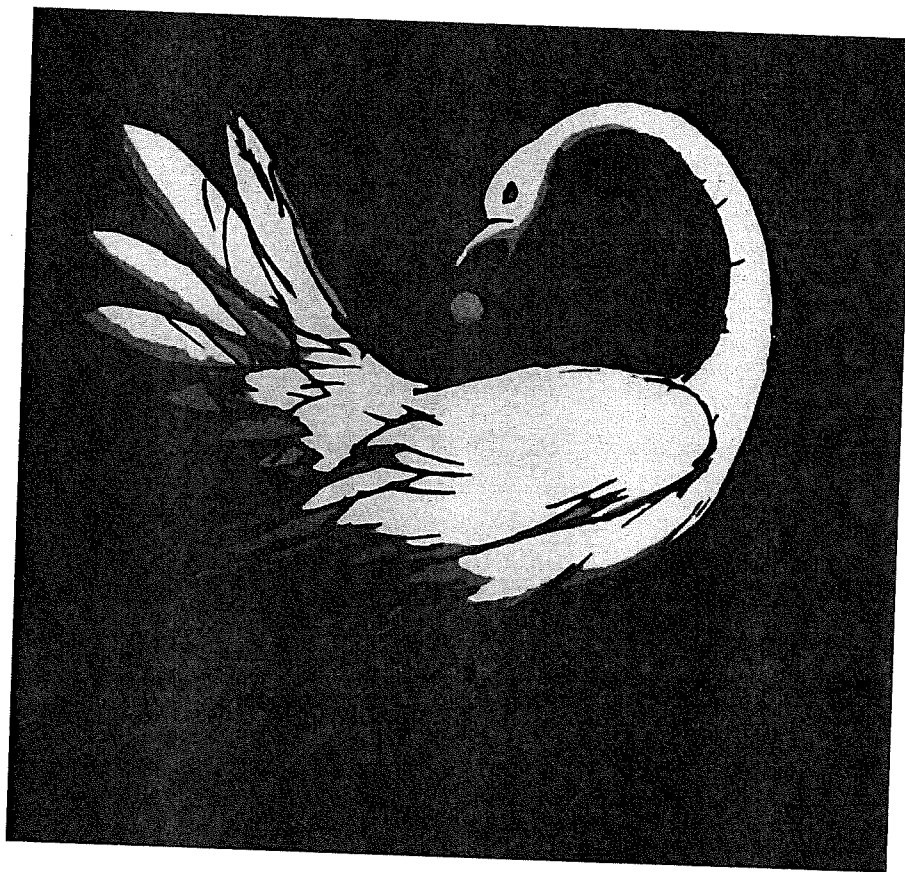


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African Conceptions of a Person: A Critical Survey

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Introduction

The concept of person or personhood has drawn the attention of a great many scholars in African philosophy, generating inevitably a diverse volume of literature. What immediately come to mind are discussions by, for instance, Abraham (1962), Busia (1954), Danquah (1944), Rattray (1916), Parrinder (1951), Tempels (1959), Kagame (1989), Mbiti (1969), Wiredu (1987), Gyekye (1995), and Gbadegesin (1998).

It would be too presumptuous, here, to attempt to discuss and evaluate in detail such a volume of literature on African conceptions of person. Rather, I merely aim to survey such literature, while pointing out some similarities, differences, and problems. For no reason other than geographical, I present West African, followed by East and Southern African concepts of person, giving expositions of both Akan and Yoruba conceptions, and Bantu ones respectively.

West African Conceptions of Person

Quite a lot of research has been conducted on how a person is conceived in West Africa, particularly from the perspective of the Akan and Yoruba cultures. This section is an exposition of the Akan and Yoruba conceptions as rendered by Wiredu, Gyekye, and Gbadegesin.

Akan Conception of Person: Wiredu vs. Gyekye

Many scholars who have researched and written on the Akan concept of person seem to be in agreement that, from the Akan perspective, a person is composed of three fundamental elements: "*nɔpadua* [body], *okra* [life-giving entity], and *sunsum* [that which gives a person's personality]" (Wiredu 1987: 160-1). The *okra* is "the innermost self, the essence, of the individual person," "the individual's life, for which reason it is referred to as *okrateasefo*, that is, the living soul," "the embodiment and transmitter of the individual's destiny [fate: *nkrabea*]," the "spark of the Supreme Being [*Onyame*] in man." The *okra* is, according to Gyekye's exposition,

"described as divine and as having an ante-mundane existence with the Supreme Being" (1995: 85).

There is, however, a controversy between Wiredu and Gyekye on how the Akan term *okra* should be translated into English. Wiredu claims that *okra* should not and 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. 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" (1987: 161).

Gyekye disagrees with Wiredu and insists that "the *okra* can be considered as the equivalent of the concept of the soul in other metaphysical systems. Hence, it is correct to translate *okra* into English as soul" (1995: 85). The reason, in Gyekye's view, for translating *okra* as soul and as immaterial, not quasi-material, is that describing it as quasi-physical as Wiredu does "runs counter to the belief of most Akan people in disembodied survival or life after death. For a crucial aspect of Akan metaphysics is the world of spirits [*asamando*], a world inhabited by the departed souls of ancestors" (ibid. 86). Wiredu, for his part, maintains that the Akans, as indeed many African peoples, famously conceive the afterlife itself in a quasi-material manner (1992: 139-40).

Clearly, for a non-Akan like me, the disagreement between Wiredu and Gyekye on this front is not so much on the existence of the *okra* as a constituent of a person, as on its nature. Though philosophically interesting, this dispute is beyond the scope of this chapter.

The second component of a person in Akan thought is *sunsum*. This is described by various scholars as "that which is responsible for the total effect communicated by an 'individual's personality'" (Wiredu 1987: 162); "the basis of a man's personality" and, as such, according to Gyekye, "it cannot be a physical thing, for qualities like courage, jealousy, gentleness, forcefulness, and dignity are psychological, not sensible or physical" (1995: 90). One interesting feature of the *sunsum* is that it is believed "to perish at death" (Wiredu 1987: 163), and that during sleep the *sunsum* is capable of leaving and later returning to the body at will, as it were (Gyekye 1995: 91). But typical of a philosophical debate, Gyekye (ibid. 90-1) claims that the *sunsum* is immaterial, divine, and immortal, whereas Wiredu (1987: 163) doubts. But again, that is not our concern here.

The third, and apparently less controversial, 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.

All these three constitute a person in Akan thought. But whether or not they interact – and, if so, how – are questions hotly debated among scholars steeped and well equipped in Akan culture.

Yoruba conception of person

According to Gbadegesin, the word for a person in Yoruba is *eniyan*, but he observes that this term has both a normative and a literal meaning. The former indicates

"the moral standing of the human being who is thus determined as [either] falling short [or living up to the expectations] of what it takes to be recognized as such" (1998: 149). In this regard, the Yoruba seem to be at one with the Bantus of Eastern and Southern Africa, as will be observed below. However, Gbadegesin makes a further debatable claim: "In Yoruba language greater emphasis is placed on this normative dimension of *eniyan* than is perhaps placed on the concept of person in the English language" (ibid. 149). This issue requires a lengthier and more in-depth discussion and evaluation than this chapter allows. I therefore leave it for the moment for further consideration in other endeavors.

What seems incontestable about the *eniyan* is that it consists of four elements: the *ara*, *okan*, *emi*, and *ori*. The *ara* is a "physical-material part of the human being. It includes the external and internal components: flesh, bone, heart, intestines, etc." (ibid. 149). Interestingly, the Yoruba regard it as fruitless and pointless to articulate the nature or essence of the body. Nor do they consider significant the question whether or not a person is all body "because it appears too obvious to them that there is more to a person than the body" (ibid. 150).

The second element of *eniyan* is *okan*. "In Yoruba language it appears to have a dual character." "On the one hand," claims Gbadegesin (ibid. 150), "it is acknowledged as the physical organ responsible for the circulation of blood, and it can be thus identified. On the other hand, however, it is also conceived as the source of emotional and psychic reactions." It is interesting to note that although the *okan* is amenable in essence to materialistic interpretations in its first character, it seems to have some resemblance to the *sunsum* of the Akans in its second character, according to Gyekye's exposition.

The third component of *eniyan* is *emi*. To Gbadegesin (ibid. 153), it is "nonphysical," "the active principle of life, the life-giving element, put in place by the deity." It is also construed as part of the divine "breath." It should be noted at this point that the nature of *emi* has been open to dispute and debate. Some scholars claim that it has an immaterial and independent existence; and others, that it is merely a principle or force which brings about various activities and actions in human beings without itself being an entity. Whether or not the *emi* is an entity is subject to further philosophical discussion.

Lastly, the fourth element of the *eniyan* is the *ori*. And like the *okan*, the *ori* has a dual nature. "On the one hand, it refers to the physical head and, given the acknowledged significance of the head vis-à-vis the rest of the body, *ori* is considered vital even in its physical character" (ibid. 154). However, the dual nature of the *ori* lies in the fact that it is "recognized as the bearer of the person's destiny as well as the determinant of personality" (ibid. 155). How this is done is a point of controversy among Yoruba thinkers and scholars. But again, the *ori* has striking similarities with the *sunsum* of the Akans.

East and Southern African Conceptions of Person

Some literature has also accumulated through researches on conceptions of person in Eastern and Southern Africa. Of particular interest are works by Tempels,

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Kagame, and Mbiti. This section, therefore, is merely an exposition of their views with a sprinkling of personal comments, since I belong to one of the so-called Bantu languages, which are spoken in this region of Africa.

The Force Thesis

What I have termed the "Force Thesis" was propounded by Placide Tempels (1959), who strongly believed in a radical conceptual difference between Africans and non-Africans on the essential nature of beings and entities in general, and human beings in particular. Africans, or the Bantu in particular, conceive of entities or beings, claims Tempels, as nothing more than essential energies or vital forces. Using Bantu or, to be precise, Luba expressions of greeting, sympathy, and hunger, Tempels (ibid. 45) concludes that every Bantu language contains words or phrases denoting a *force*, which constitutes "the integrity of our whole being." And he goes on to claim that those words or phrases, *kufwa* and *kufwididila* in Luba, and *kufa* and *kufadi* in Chichewa, for instance, indicating different degrees of loss of vital force "the superlative of which signifies total paralysis of the power to live," should not be translated in English as "to die" and "to die entirely" precisely because, for Tempels (ibid. 47), Westerners "hold a *static* conception of 'being', [and Africans] a dynamic [one]" (ibid. 51). For Tempels, specifically what is wrong with such translations is that they fail to capture what he regards as the processual connotation of the Luba words which refer to points in a processual continuum. Indeed, according to Tempels, for a Bantu, "'Force' in his thought is a necessary element in 'being', and the concept 'force' is inseparable from the definition of 'being'... without the element of 'force', 'being' cannot be conceived" (ibid. 50-1).

What needs to be pointed out immediately is that by claiming, as Tempels does in the passage above, that force is an essential property of being, he might seem to be implying that, although "force" is a necessary attribute of "being," it is nevertheless not its sufficient condition, so that "being" might be thought to possess some properties or attributes other than that of force. However, the picture becomes clearer a few lines later when Tempels (ibid. 51) insists that force is not only a necessary attribute of being, but *is* (the essence of) being in Bantu thought: "Force is not for [the Bantu] an adventitious, accidental reality. Force is even more than a necessary attribute of beings: *Force is the nature of being, force is being, being is force.*"

A number of questions immediately arise in the Tempelsian force thesis. Importantly, the thesis seems to beg the question; for, given that being has been defined in terms of force, the question arises what force is in Bantu languages and thought. And this is not at all clear. Chichewa, for example, one of the Bantu languages, provides us with no clue as to how the word "force" is to be comprehended in Chewan thought and language. Even Tempels himself does not indicate how the concept of "force" might be translated in the Luba language. However, it should be pointed out here that this idea of force among the Luba seems to have similarities with that of *sunsum* and *okan* among the Akan and Yoruba respectively.

Secondly, I find it quite baffling that Tempels regards it as a mistake to translate *kufa* as "to die" and *kufadi* as "to die indeed," for if there are words and phrases in Chichewa that admit of easy translation, *kufa* and *kufadi* must be among the easiest.

To say "X *akufa*" in Chichewa is no more to regard death or dying as a process than when it is uttered in English that "X is dying." Similarly, to say "X *akufadi*" in Chichewa is not so much to specify the ultimate degree of loss of life as to demonstrate the degree of one's certainty about X's actual death. And to regard these dictions as expressions of degrees and intensities of force is to take too literally a mode of expression or manner of speech that is figurative.

Thirdly, proceeding in the same vein noted above, Tempels (ibid. 55) insists on the distinction between "a human" and "a person," and claims, rather surprisingly, that *munthu*, in Chichewa, for example, should not be translated as "a human," but rather as "a person," because "*Muntu* signifies vital force endowed with intelligence and will." But one cannot help but ask what the term "human" means if it does not denote entities in possession of intelligence and will. On this Tempels leaves us in the dark as if there are humans (*wanthu* in Chichewa) who do not possess intelligence and will. On this point, Chichewa has counter-evidence: *munthu* denotes as much a "human being" as it does a "person."

However, this point has to be made with a qualification. In Chichewa, it is said: *Azungu siwanthu*. On a literal translation this statement means "Whites are not human," which would seem to indicate that the Chewa deny humanness to whites. Yet with a little analysis, this statement is seen not to be uttered to assert the non-humanity of whites; rather, it denies that whites are Chewa persons insofar as their looks and behavior are at variance with that of the Chewa. Thus, this statement should not be translated as "Whites are not human," but rather as "Whites are not Chewa persons." And to this extent, Tempels (ibid. 57) is quite right in advising against translating *munthu* as "human," but, rather, as "person."

But some situations warrant translating *munthu* as "human." For example, to say that *Achewa ndi wanthu* is more to assert the humanness of the Chewa than their personhood. Similarly *Azungu ndi wanthu* means that whites are just as human as the Chewa except for pigmentational differences. Here, *munthu* refers to the species of human beings and has universal applicability, whereas when this word is translated as "person," it involves a sociocentric view of personhood, which varies from one culture to another and from one time to another due to the dynamic nature of culture and society.

Fourthly, although Tempels tries to steer clear of the Western conception of being in his account of the concept of a person in Bantu thought, he surreptitiously reverts to the very distinctions employed in Western philosophy to distinguish humans from other entities. He claims that in Bantu thought humans are beings distinct from other beings by their properties of reason and volition. Thus, on the Tempelsian thesis of being as force, it should apparently be possible to distinguish between rational and non-rational forces, and voluntary and non-voluntary forces. For, according to the Force Thesis of beings as forces, there must be a radical difference between vital forces that have intelligence and those that do not. But it does seem that what it means for a vital force to have intelligence and will or, for that matter, what an intelligent vital force or a voluntary vital force is, cannot be accounted for in the Tempelsian framework. In any case, the properties of intelligence and will are precisely what, in Western philosophy, are taken to be properties distinguishing the genus "humans" from the species "animals." To assume that

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this way of making the distinction is adequate in Bantu thought is open to question. These are some of the problems bedeviling the Force Thesis. So much for the Force Thesis.

The Communalism Thesis

This thesis has Tempelsian origins, although Mbiti is now closely associated with it. In *Bantu Philosophy*, Tempels is quite explicit in claiming that in Bantu thought, persons or humans are defined and individuated communally:

This concept of separate beings, of substance... which find themselves side by side, entirely independent one of another, is foreign to Bantu thought. Bantu hold that created beings preserve a bond one with another, an intimate ontological relationship, comparable with the causal tie which binds creature with Creator. For the Bantu there is interaction of being with being, that is to say, of force with force. (1959: 58)

And a few pages later it is remarked that the "child, even the adult, remains always for the Bantu a man, a force, *in causal dependence and ontological subordination* to the forces which are his father and mother. The older force ever dominates the younger" (ibid. 60).

Reflecting in the same vein, Mbiti writes:

In traditional life, the individual does not and cannot exist alone except corporately. He owes his existence to other people, including those of past generations and his contemporaries. He is simply part of the whole. The community must therefore make, create, or produce the individual; for the individual depends on the corporate group... Whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual. The individual can only say: "I am, because we are; and since we are therefore I am." This is a cardinal point in the understanding of the African view of man. (1969: 108-9)

That Mbiti is propagating a sociocentric view of personhood, in which the status of an individual is determined through cultural criteria, is quite evident from the assertion that a society "makes, creates or produces the individual." And although Mbiti does not spell out some of the criteria societies use, Shaw (2000) has provided us with an example of a conception of personhood as dependent on the quantity of secrets an individual holds.

As with the Force Thesis, the Communalism Thesis is also confronted with a number of problems. First, it should be conceded that in putting this thesis in a form reminiscent of the Cartesian *cogito* argument, namely, that in Africa *we are* therefore *I am*, Mbiti aims at underscoring the extent to which communal life is esteemed in Africa. For example, in the Chewa language it is crisply and proverbially said: *Kaliko-kha nikanyama; tuli tuwili nituwanthu* (What is alone is a brute animal; whatever or whoever has a partner/neighbor is a human being), suggesting that it is in the nature of a human being to lead a communal life of one form or another.

However, and this is the second point, the validity of Mbiti's argument is questionable. Although the *cogito* argument could have pretensions of validity when

provided with "Whatever thinks exists" as a suppressed premiss, I find it difficult to imagine quite what suppressed premiss would render Mbiti's argument valid.

Thirdly, to assert African communalism is not in any way to imply the denial of the recognition of individual human beings qua individuals. African communalism, in fact, takes cognizance of ontological pluralism; and to start, as Mbiti does, with the assertion that *we are* presumes prior recognition of the individuality of those making up the "we." For although it is mathematically possible to imagine a set which happens to be empty, it seems impossible to imagine the existence of an empty human society. And to claim that "whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group" and vice versa is no doubt to forget the difference between individuals, on the one hand, and sets of individuals on the other. Africans, certainly the Chewa, are aware of this important difference as exemplified by the following expressions: *Chaona mnzako chapita mawa chili paiwe* (What your neighbor has experienced is gone, tomorrow it will be your turn); *Mvula ikakuona litsiro siikata* (When the rain has seen that you are dirty it does not stop pouring); and *Wanthu ndi mchenga saundika* (Human beings are like sand out of which one cannot make a mountain). All these proverbs and maxims are reflective of the Chewa's recognition of the individuality of human beings, their fates, predicaments, and experiences.

Fourthly, it is indeed the case that the elders tended to have an epistemological monopoly over the young. But to concede this point is not to assert an ontological distinction between the elders and the young; rather, it is merely to point out an epistemological difference; the young are not ontologically less human than the elders. Furthermore, although African cultures in general, and the Chewa culture in particular, contain expressions extolling the elders as the seat of wisdom, for instance *Mau wa akuluakulu akoma atagonela* (The elders' words are still sweet after a year), there is also evidence demonstrating the rebellious tendencies of the young. To such a proverb, they would retort: *Tsobola wakale sawawa* (Old pepper is never hot), meaning that what held sway before need not necessarily hold sway now or in the future and that the advice of the elders is likely to be obsolete and irrelevant on that count. Thus, the most serious problem of the Communalism Thesis is that it conflates the epistemological with the ontological status of a human being.

However, one advantage of this doctrine is that it underscores the processual nature of personhood, the constant and gradual remaking of persons through, inter alia, the acquisition and mastery of both cultural and esoteric knowledge. And to acquire such knowledge, "the ontological priority of the collectivity" is indeed *pre-supposed*. Moreover, "the ontological uniqueness" of each individual is recognized even if not underscored. Though different, these two perspectives are complementary; for "the integrity and perpetuation of every *collective* order depends in the last analysis on the initiatives and actions of *individual* persons" (Jackson and Karp 1990: 27-8).

The Shadow Thesis

The shadow doctrine has been proffered by Alexis Kagame, who claims, in certain respects quite rightly as will be shown below, that for the Bantu a human being is

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both a *complete* animal and a being endowed with *intelligence*; complete, because he or she possesses "the vital principle of animality known as shadow," and intelligent insofar as he or she "is animated by a second vital principle which is immortal and in which are anchored the intelligent operations proper to man" (1989: 35).

However, Kagame points out (*ibid.* 36) other considerations which clearly demarcate humanity from animality in general. The Bantu, he claims, do not only possess intelligence, but also "the heart." With the intelligence, the human being is not only capable of reflecting and meditating "upon the data of his senses," he is also able to "compare the facts of the knowledge he has acquired," and "to invent something new by combining previously acquired knowledge." All these operations are open to a human being by virtue of being in possession of the faculty of reason or intelligence.

But as regards the "heart," Kagame claims that it "integrates all that the interior man is; it harmonizes the operations and acquisitions of intelligence, by adding to them the acts which other cultures attribute to the will" (*ibid.*). Kagame's remark is, as it stands, quite misleading, because physiologically humans cannot be said to be more in possession of a heart than, say, pigs. However, precisely because he claims that the Bantu regard this human "heart" as the being in charge of the operations of the intelligence, then pigs definitely are to be denied possession of such a "heart."

Now, what exactly is this "heart"? In almost all Bantu cultures, and certainly in Chewa culture, by the "heart" is meant the *personality* of an individual human being: "in the heart lies the *personality* of man"; "it is that by which this man is himself and not another" (Nothomb, quoted in *ibid.*). Thus, the "heart" understood as personality is what characterizes human beings, and is one of the criteria for distinguishing one person from another. And on this, Kagame is quite right; and his observations are quite in unison with the sayings and practices extant in Central and Southern African cultures in general, and in the Chewa culture in particular. Indeed, in the Chewa language it is generally said: *Ujeni ndi wokoma mtima* (So-and-so has a sweet heart), meaning that "So-and-so" has a good or kind personality.

One advantage of Kagame's thesis, having regard particularly to the significance of the personality of a human being, is that it is a move toward the resolution of the problem of personal identity; for an individual person would, in Bantu languages and thought, be distinguished from another *at least* because of his or her personality and behavior.

But problems arise with regard to Kagame's claim that human beings are *complete* animals; for a cow could be said to be as complete in itself as a goat. Thus, the question arises what could possibly be meant by a *complete animal*. On this issue, Kagame leaves us in the dark. Instead of tackling this question, he addressed to his interlocutors in his interactive research among the Bantu the question at what point a man becomes a complete animal, in response to which he got such varied answers as: "from the moment he exists in his mother's womb" (East Africa); "when a name has been given him" (Zaire, now Democratic Republic of Congo) (*ibid.* 30); and "from the moment he puts reason to good use" (Malawi/Southern Africa) (*ibid.* 37).

It should be noted that the important question is not at what point in time an individual becomes a person, but rather what constitutes the completeness of humanhood. And this can only be extracted and analyzed from specific intimations from the various cultures of the world (see, for example, Wright 1984: 183ff; Floistad 1987: 153ff).

True, the significance of naming an individual has been emphasized by a number of scholars in Africa. But what should be borne in mind is that the acquisition of a name is of a cultural significance, not of an ontological significance. And to say that a child is "fully a man only when a name is given him" (Kagame 1989: 36) is no doubt to underscore the cultural significance at the expense of the ontological status. For, before an individual is given a name he or she is an existent human being who happens to be nameless. The significance of the name is more to do with, *inter alia*, what the society expects or wishes him or her to be. Before the act of naming, he or she is not any the less human; he or she is endowed with feelings and senses, and an intellect which is yet to be put to some use.

It might very well be argued that among the Chewa a child that dies before coming out of "maternity," that is, before the time when baby and mother are seen in public after customary seclusion just before delivery, is always buried by women without any ceremony or mourning whatsoever. Such a child is referred to as *kansenyé* (a tiny gazelle), allegedly indicating that a being becomes human only after coming out of a maternity (*chikuta* in Chichewa). But such an inference, in my opinion, is not warranted. Lack of a funeral ceremony is not indicative of the denial of humanhood. Rather, it is due to cultural reasons, two of which are, surely, that although such babies are indeed human, they never had a chance to utilize their faculty of reasoning, and were not socialized into the society.

Kagame, it should be conceded, fails to define what he means by the *completeness* and the *shadow* of human beings. And the picture is further complicated by his remarks on what the Bantu believe happens to a person at death. He claims that, to the Bantu, death marks the dissolution of the union between the *shadow* and the *intelligence* of a person; and that after death the shadow completely disappears. Indeed, it is still believed among the Chewa that a dead person is devoid of a shadow even when exposed to the light of the sun. But how to comprehend what *shadow* exactly means seems quite difficult.

However, it seems uncontested that the Chewa do not mean literally that a dead person has no physical shadow; rather, what seems to be meant is a symbolic or metaphorical shadow. This symbolic shadow presumably refers to the departure or absence, at death, of an individual's personality and individuality. Since personhood is not static, but a dynamic, gradual, and persistent process in which personality is continually reinvented, death marks the end of this creative process, thus signaling the end of the quality of personality which is as elusive as a shadow. And among the Chewa, as also among the Bantu of the Lower Congo, the "shadow of a person is a perfect symbol of individual identity" (Jackson and Karp 1990: 18). Individual identity is felt to be as problematic to pinpoint as personhood. Thus, ascribing a metaphorical meaning to "shadow" seems to lead to the conclusion that the Chewa in particular, and possibly the Bantu in general, regard personhood more as a process than as an essence, whereas using a literal meaning of "shadow" does not seem to

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lead us anywhere. It seems, then, on the whole, that the Shadow Thesis, its problems notwithstanding, holds some promise in the analysis of the Chewa conception of personhood.

Interestingly, this concept of the shadow among the Bantu is quite similar in some respects to that of *sunsum* among the Akans. For, as Kwasi Wiredu pointed out to me in personal communication, the word *sunsum* literally means "shadow." However, that is something awaiting further research and discussion.

Concluding Remarks

I have attempted to survey and expound various conceptions of a person in Africa. The survey does not claim to be exhaustive; rather, it is simply a summary of what, to my knowledge, has been produced so far. However, I might be criticized for not explicitly mentioning work done in Southern Africa on *ubuntuism* as a concept of person. My brief response is that *ubuntuism* falls within the communalistic conception of person discussed in this chapter.

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