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Person and community in African thought

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The existence of a social structure is an outstanding, in fact, a necessary feature of every human society. A social structure is evolved not only to give effect to certain conceptions of human nature, but also to provide a framework for both the realization of the potentials, goals, and hopes of the individual members of the society and the continuous existence and survival of the society. The type of social structure or arrangement evolved by a particular society seems to reflect – and be influenced by – the public conceptions of personhood held in the society. These conceptions are articulated in the critical analyses and arguments of its intellectuals.

Questions raised by the intellectuals, especially the moral and political philosophers among them, relate, in this connection, to the metaphysical and moral status of a person (or, self). The metaphysical question is whether a person, even though he/she lives in a human society, is a self-sufficient atomic individual who does not depend on his/her relationships with others for the realization of his/her ends and who has ontological priority over the community, or whether he/she is by nature a communal (or, communitarian) being, having natural and essential relationships with others. Moral questions, which may, in some sense, be said to be linked to, or engendered by, metaphysical conceptions of the person, relate to:

- 1 The status of the rights of the individual – whether these are so fundamental that they may not be overridden in any circumstances.
 - 2 The place of duties – how the individual sees his/her socio-ethical roles in relation to the interests and welfare of others.
 - 3 The existence and appreciation of a sense of common life or common (collective) good.
- Moral or normative matters may be expressed in sophisticated and elaborate conceptual formula-

tion; but as practical matters they have their best and unambiguous articulation or translation in the actual way of life of a people – in the way individuals are expected or not expected to respond to one another in times of need, to spontaneously care for one another, and so on.

My intention in this paper is to explore the above questions which bear on personhood and community; how the two concepts feature and are understood in African culture will be my point of departure. In *An essay on African philosophical thought: The Akan conceptual scheme* (1987) I discussed the concepts of individuality and communalism as they are understood in Akan philosophy in the traditional setting. I shall now, however, focus my attention mainly on the normative aspects of personhood and community.

COMMUNITARIANISM IN AFRICAN SOCIO-ETHICAL THOUGHT

The communal or communitarian (I use the two words interchangeably) aspects of African socio-ethical thought are reflected in the communitarian features of the social structures of African societies. As remarked by many scholars or researchers on the cultures of Africa, these features are not only outstanding, but the defining characteristics of those cultures. The sense of community that characterizes social relations among individuals is a direct consequence of the communitarian social arrangements. This sense of community, according to Dickson, is a:

... characteristic of African life of which attention has been drawn again and again by both African and non-African writers on Africa. Indeed, to many this characteristic defines Africanness (1977:4).

According to Senghor:

Negro-African society puts more stress on the group than on the individuals, more on solidarity than on the activity and needs of the individual, more on the communion of persons than on their autonomy. Ours is a community society (1964:93-94).

Kenyatta made the following observation with regard to the traditional life in Kenya:

According to Gikuyu ways of thinking, nobody is an isolated individual. Or rather, his uniqueness is a secondary fact about him; first and foremost he is several people's relative and several people's contemporary (1965:297).

Elsewhere Kenyatta observed the following:

Individualism and self-seeking were ruled out ... The personal pronoun 'I' was used very rarely in public assemblies. The spirit of collectivism was (so) much ingrained in the mind of the people (1965:180).

The communitarian ethos of the African culture is also echoed in the works of some African novelists. Clearly, then, the African social structures with its underlying socio-ethical philosophy, was and very much still is, communitarian.

Now, what would be the conception of personhood held in such a communitarian socio-ethical philosophy? The question is appropriate and would need to be explored, for it is possible for people to assume offhandedly that with its emphasis on communal values, collective good, and shared ends, communitarianism invariably conceives the person as *wholly* constituted by social relationships; that it tends to whittle down the moral autonomy of the person; that it makes the being and life of the individual person totally dependent on the activities, values, projects, practices, and ends of the community; and consequently, that it diminishes his/her freedom and capability to choose or question or re-evalu-

ate the shared values of the community.

The communitarian conception of the person needs to be critically and thoroughly examined before making a final judgement on those assumptions. In making the communitarian self, as variously understood in African culture, my point of departure, I shall set off from the views clearly expressed in an interesting paper published some time ago by Menkiti. Making Mbiti's (1970:141) understanding or assessment of the status of the person in African culture expressed in the statement 'I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am' (Mbiti 1970:141) the basis for his analysis, Menkiti maintains that the African view asserts the ontological primacy, and hence the ontological independence, of the community. He says that:

... as far as Africans are concerned, the reality of the communal world takes precedence over the reality of the individual life histories, whatever these may be (Menkiti 1984:171).

From this assumption, Menkiti infers the following:

- 1 That in the African view, in contrast with the Western one 'it is the community which defines the person as person, not some isolated static quality of rationality, wills or memory' (1984:172).
- 2 That the African view supports 'the notion of personhood as acquired' (1984:174,178-179).
- 3 That 'personhood is something which has to be achieved, and is not given simply because one is born of human seed' (1984:172).
- 4 That 'as far as African societies are concerned, personhood is something at which individuals could fail' (1984:173).

He infers the notion of an acquisition of personhood also from the use of the pronoun *it* 'in many languages, English included' (1984:173) to refer to 'children and new borns' (1984:173). I take issue with the views or conclusions expressed in (1) to (3), for they do not necessarily follow from the notion of the priority of the community. Menkiti's views on the metaphysical

status of the community vis-à-vis that of the person and his account of personhood in African moral, social, and political philosophy are, in my opinion, overstated and not entirely correct, and require some amendments or refinements. I will in the fullness of time justify my criticisms of his views.

However, I should perhaps point out here that the metaphysical construal of personhood in African thought such as Menkiti's, which gives the community priority over the individual person, has a parallel in the conceptions of the social status of the person held by some scholars, both African and non-African. Their position was grounded in the ideological choice of socialism – 'African socialism' – made by most African political leaders in the early days of political independence. Or, is it the case that the social conception of the individual's status is a logical consequence of the metaphysical? The social conception holds a view of communitarianism which may be either radical and unrestricted or moderate and restricted, with either extreme or moderate socio-political consequences for the individual person. Thus, the advocates of the ideology of African socialism, such as Nkrumah, Senghor, and Nyerere, in their anxiety to find anchorage for their ideological choice in the traditional African ideas about society, argued that socialism was foreshadowed in the African traditional idea and practice of communalism (communitarianism). Thus, Nkrumah observed:

If one seeks the socio political ancestor of socialism, one must go to communalism ... in socialism, the principles underlying communalism are given expression in modern circumstances (1964:73).

And Senghor also opined:

Negro-African society is collectivist or, more exactly communal, because it is rather a communion of souls than an aggregate of individuals (1964:49).

These statements clearly suggest the conviction

of these African leaders or scholars that the African social order, in the traditional setting, was communitarian and would, for that reason, easily translate into modern socialism. Hence the euphoric and unrelenting pursuit of socialism by most African political leaders for more than two decades following the attainment of political independence. But in as much as they do not appear to have allowed room for the exercise of individual rights, the view of communitarianism held by them may, most probably be said to be radical, excessive, and unrestricted – a view of communitarianism I find unsupportable.

Communitarianism immediately sees the human person as an inherently (intrinsically) communal being, embedded in a context of social relationships and interdependence, never as an isolated, atomic individual. Consequently it sees the community not as a mere association of individual persons whose interests and ends are contingently congruent, but as a group of persons linked by interpersonal bonds, biological and/or non-biological, who consider themselves primarily as members of the group and who have common interests, goals, and values. The notion of common interests and values is crucial to an adequate conception of community; that notion in fact defines the community. It is the notion of common interests, goals, and values that differentiates a community from a mere association of individual persons. Members of a community share goals and values. They have intellectual and ideological, as well as emotional, attachments to those goals and values; as long as they cherish them, they are ever ready to pursue and defend them.

It is an obvious fact, of course, that an individual human being is born into an existing human society and, therefore, into a human culture, the latter being a product of the former. As an Akan maxim has it, when a person descends from heaven, he/she descends into a human society (*onipa firi soro besi a, obesi onipa kurom*). The fact that a person is born into an existing community must suggest a conception of the person as a communitarian being by nature, even though some people insist on the

individuality of the person. The communitarian conception of the person has some of the following implications:

- 1 That the human person does not voluntarily choose to enter into human community, that is, that community life is not optional for any individual person.
- 2 That the human person is at once a cultural being.
- 3 That the human person cannot – perhaps must not – live in isolation from other persons.
- 4 That the human person is naturally oriented toward other persons and must have relationships with them.
- 5 That social relationships are not contingent but necessary.
- 6 That, following from (4) and (5), the person is constituted, but only partly (see below), by social relationships in which he/she necessarily finds him/herself.

The fundamentally relational character of the person and the interdependence of human individuals arising out of their natural sociality are thus clear. It is the necessary relationships which complete the being of the individual person who, prior to entering into those relationships, would not be self-complete for, as we are reminded by an Akan maxim, a person is not a palm tree that he should be self-complete or self-sufficient (*onipa nnye abe na ne ho abiyia ne ho*). It is evidently true that in the social context, in terms of functioning or flourishing in a human community, the individual person is not self-sufficient; his/her capacities, talents, and dispositions are not adequate for the realization of his/her potential and basic needs. What accrues to a person's natural sociality – and hence natural rationality – provides the buttress indispensable to the actualization of his/her possibilities.

All this presupposes the priority of the cultural community in which the individual person finds him/herself. Yet, it might be supposed that if a community crucially consists of persons sharing interests and values in some sense, wouldn't this fact establish the priority of the individual rather than that of the community,

and that therefore the community existentially derives from individuals and the relationships that would exist between them? We may here turn briefly, but critically, to the Akan maxim that says that one tree does not make or constitute a forest (*duo baako nnye kwae*). This means that for there to be a forest there should be a number of individual trees; the reality of the forest derives from the individual trees. In the context of the relationship between the individual and the community, the analogical meaning of the maxim is that one individual person does not constitute a community. Just as we would not speak of a forest where there is only one tree, so we would not – cannot – speak of a community where there is only one person. Even though existing or ongoing communities are of course of varying sizes, yet not even the smallest one is constituted by one individual person. According to the maxim, a community emerges, that is, comes into existence, with the congregation of individual persons: the priority of the individual vis-à-vis the derivativeness of the community appears implicit in the maxim.

The analogy the maxim seeks to establish between the forest and community, however, is a defective one, even though the notion of the metaphysical priority of the individual person implicit in the explanation of the maxim I have provided may be found attractive by some people. The analogy is defective in that 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 potentials without the concrete act of relating to other individual persons. Also, whereas the individual person is born into an existing community, not into a solitary wilderness, and is naturally oriented toward other persons, the individual tree can sprout from, or be planted, in a lonely place. But it would be pointless to strain the analogy of the maxim whose intention is to establish that the whole is a function of its parts, and hence to establish the ontological derivativeness of the community.

The ontological derivativeness of the community, however, cannot be upheld. The reason is that the view of the priority of the individual, logically implied by the notion of the ontological derivativeness of the community, makes relationships between persons merely contingent, voluntary and optional.¹⁴ That conclusion may not yield or lead to the emergence of a community, which, however, is necessary as a basis, not only for defining and articulating the values and goals shareable by individual persons, but also for realizing the nature or possibilities of the individual person. The community alone constitutes the context, the social or cultural space, in which the actualization of the possibilities of the individual person can take place, providing the individual person the opportunity to express his/her individuality, to acquire and develop his/her personality and to fully become the kind of person he/she wants to be, i.e. to attain the status, goals, expectations to be, etc. The system of values which the person inherits as he/she enters into the cultural community and the range of goals in life from which he/she can choose – these are not anterior to a cultural structure but a function of the structure itself: they are therefore posterior to – indeed the products of the culture, i.e. the community. Thus, insofar as the cultural community constitutes the context or medium in which the individual person works out and chooses his/her goals and life plans, and, through these activities, ultimately becomes what he/she wants to be – the sort of status he/she wants to acquire – the cultural community must be held as prior to the individual.

COMMUNAL STRUCTURE AND PERSONHOOD

The articulation of the ontological primacy of the community, the natural sociality of the human person, the organic character of the relations between individual persons, and the all-importance of the community for the total well-being or complete realization of the nature of

the individual person – all this as explicated in the foregoing section certainly can give rise to a hyperbolic and extreme view of the functional and normative status of the community. The characterizations of the nature and status of the community just provided may be true; in fact they are true, to my mind. Yet one could err in at least some of the conclusions one may draw from them by overlooking the logic or relevance of attributes that can be delineated as belonging essentially to the human person *qua* person. A consideration of other aspects of human nature would certainly be appropriate: a person is by nature a social (communal) being, yes; but he/she is by nature other things as well (i.e. a person possesses other essential attributes). Failure to recognize this may result in pushing the significance and implications of a person's communal nature beyond their limits, an act that would in turn result in investing the community with an all-engulfing moral authority to determine all things about the life of the individual person. One might thus easily succumb to the temptation of exaggerating the normative status and power of the cultural community in relation to those of the person, and thus obfuscating our understanding the real nature of the person. It seems to me that Menkiti succumbed to this temptation.

Menkiti in his interesting paper 'Person and community in traditional African thought' (1984) deploys arguments to prove that African thought considers personhood as something defined or conferred by the community and as something that must be acquired by the individual. In my critical examination of his paper I shall start with arguments that emerge out of his understanding of African cultural practices or beliefs and his attribution to African thought of an analysis of a characteristic of English grammar.

Menkiti, as I have already mentioned, infers the notion of acquisition of personhood from the use of the neuter pronoun 'it' in many languages, including English, to refer to children and new borns but not to adults. The point he wants to make is that the use of the neuter

pronoun for children and new borns means that they are not yet persons – the community has not yet conferred personhood on them. They are now going through the ‘process’ of becoming persons. The inference Menkiti draws would most probably be incorrect for a number of African languages. It is surprising that an inference based on the characteristics of a non-African language is being regarded as having serious implications for African thought!

It would have been more instructive and appropriate for him to examine how the neuter pronoun ‘it’ functions in some African languages, and whether it functions in the same way in African languages as it does in English. What he says about the pronoun ‘it’ does not at all apply to the Akan language, for example: the neuter pronoun ‘it’ does not exist in this language for animate things. Thus: ‘He is in the room’ is translated in Akan as *ɔwɔ dan no mu*; ‘she is in the room’ as *ɔwɔ dan no mu*; and ‘it (referring to a dog) is in the room’ also as *ɔwɔ dan no mu*. However, ‘it’ is used for inanimate things. Thus, the answer to one question ‘where is the book?’ will be *ɛwɔ dan no mu*, that is, ‘it is in the room’. Thus ‘e’ is used as the neuter pronoun for only inanimate objects. Children and newly borns are of course not inanimate objects. Since the Akan neuter pronoun ‘ɔ’ applies to all the three genders (strictly only to a part, i.e. the animate part, of the neuter gender, though), it would follow, on Menkiti’s showing, that not even the adult or oldest person can strictly be referred to as a person! For the answer to the question, ‘where is the old man?’ (if we want to use a pronoun) in Akan will be *ɔwɔ dan no mu*, that is, ‘he/it is in the room’.

In Ga-Dangme languages, also in Ghana, the pronoun ‘e’ is used to refer to everything – stones, trees, dogs, and human beings (of both the masculine and feminine genders). The pronoun ‘e’ (it/he/she) is thus gender-neutral, encompassing all the genders: masculine, feminine, and neuter. In this group of languages there is no pronoun used solely for inanimate objects, as there is in Akan, for the pronoun ‘e’ is used for both animate and inanimate objects.

Clearly, then, neither the neuter pronoun in the Akan language for animate things, nor the gender-neutral pronoun in Ga-Dangme languages, gives an indication as to the real nature of its designatum. The argument that ‘it’ used of new borns and children (in the English language), implies that they are not yet persons therefore collapses when examined in the context of these languages, for ‘it’ in Akan and Ga-Dangme languages is, as we have observed, used to refer to adults and older peoples as well as to children and new borns. Are those older people persons or are they yet to acquire their personhood? The semantics of the neuter pronoun in the African languages I have examined does not in any way lead to a view of non-person. Thus Menkiti errs.

Menkiti also argues that the relative absence of ritualized grief over the death of a child in African societies in contrast to the elaborate burial ceremony and ritualized grief in the event of the death of an older person, also supports his point about the conferment by the community of personhood status. It is not true that every older person who dies in an African community is given elaborate burial. 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. Older persons who may not satisfy such criteria may in fact be given simple and poor funerals and attenuated forms of grief expressions. As to the absence of ritualized grief on the death of a child, this has no connection whatsoever with the African view of personhood as such, as alleged by Menkiti. It stems rather from beliefs about the possible consequences, for the mother of the dead child, of showing excessive grief: one belief, among the Akan people, is that excessive demonstration of grief in the event of the death of a child will make the mother infertile, as it will make her reach her menopause prematurely; another belief is that the excessive show of grief over the death of a

child will drive the dead child too 'far away' for it to reincarnate, and so be reborn; and so on. These beliefs are of course superstitious, but that is beside the point.

Thus 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. A human person is a person whatever his/her age or social status. Personhood may reach its full realization in community, but it is not acquired or yet to be achieved as one goes along in society. What a person acquires are status, habits, and personality or character traits: he/she, *qua* person, thus becomes the subject of the acquisition, and being thus prior to the acquisition process, he/she cannot be defined by what he/she acquires. One is a person because of what one is, not because of what one has acquired. Thus, the contrast Menkiti wants to establish between the African and the Western views of the nature of personhood by describing the former as 'processual' (Menkiti 1984:172) or 'some sort of ontological progression' (1984:173), and the latter as grounded on 'some isolated static quality' (1984:172) is, in my opinion, misguided.

However, there are some expressions in the Akan language, and judgements or evaluations made about life and conduct of people, which give the impression that it is the community that defines and confers personhood. When an individual appears in his conduct to be wicked, bad, ungenerous, cruel, selfish, the Akan would say of that individual, that 'he is not a human person' (*onnye' nipa*). Implicit in this judgement is the assumption that there are certain basic norms and ideals to which the behaviour of a person, if he/she is a person, ought to conform, and that there are moral virtues that the human person is capable of displaying in his/her conduct. And because the person is thought to be capable of displaying those virtues, it is expected that he/she would, when the situation arises, display them in his/her conduct and act in conformity with the accepted moral values and standards. Considering the situations in which that judgement is made about persons, these norms, ideals,

and moral virtues can be said to include generosity, kindness, compassion, benevolence, respect, and concern for others; in fact, any action or behaviour that conduces to the promotion of the welfare of others. And the reason for that judgement made of an individual is that that individual's actions and conduct are considered as falling short of the standards and ideals of personhood.

In Akan cultures, then, much is expected of a person in terms of the display of moral virtue. The pursuit or practice of moral virtue is held as intrinsic to the conception of a person. The position here may thus be schematized as: for any *p*, if *p* is a person, then *p* ought to display in his/her conduct the norms and ideals of personhood. Thus when a person fails to exhibit the expected moral virtues in his/her conduct, he/she is said not to be a person (*ɔnye' nipa*). The evaluative judgement opposite to the one we have been considering is, 'he is a person' (*oye' nipa*). The judgement here is not a descriptive one at all, though it can be used descriptively, for instance, to distinguish a human being from a tree. A descriptive use of that judgement would be obvious. It is, however, the normative form of the judgement that I am concerned to point out:

'he is a person', used normatively, means, 'he has good character', 'he is peaceful – not troublesome', 'he is kind', 'he has respect for others', 'he is humble' (Ahene-Affoh 1976:51).

The Akan, fully satisfied with, and profoundly appreciative of, the high standards of the morality of a person's conduct, would say of such a person: 'he/she is a real (human) person' (*ɔye onipa paa*).

Now, the moral significance of 'denying' personhood to a human being on the grounds that his actions are dissonant with certain fundamental norms and ideals of personhood, or that he fails to exhibit certain virtues in his behaviour is extremely interesting and is worth noting. It means that human nature is considered in Akan culture to be essentially good, not depraved or

warped by some original sin; that the human person is basically good, can and should do good, and should in turn have good done to him/her. It means, further, that the human person is considered to possess an innate capacity for virtue, for performing morally right actions and therefore should be treated as a morally responsible agent. I may here refer to the Akan maxim or belief that 'God created every man (to be) good' (*Onyome bɔɔ obiara yee*). The meaning of the statement that 'God created every man good' is ambiguous. It is ambiguous with regard to a person's actually doing good, that is, actually behaving virtuously, and being capable of moral choice, that is, having the moral sense to distinguish between good and evil or right and wrong. In other words, it is not clear whether the statement means that a person is determined to do good, to pursue virtues, or that he/she is merely endowed with a sense of right and wrong. How do we interpret the meaning of the statement then? In view of a person's evil and unethical actions, the first alternative interpretation cannot be accepted as the correct meaning of the statement: the first alternative is plainly contradicted by the person's moral experience. The correct interpretation of the view that the human person was created a moral being then might be that he/she is a being endowed with moral sense and capable of making moral judgements. The human person can then be held as a moral agent, a moral subject – not that his/her virtuous character is a settled matter, but that he/she is capable of virtue.

The foregoing discussion of some morally significant expressions in the Akan language or judgements made about the conduct of persons suggests a conception of moral personhood; a person is defined in terms of moral qualities or capacities: a human person is a being who has a moral sense and is capable of making moral judgements. This conception of a person, however, must not be considered as eliminating or writing off children or infants as persons even though they are not (yet) considered as moral agents, as capable of exercising moral sense. The reason is that, even though children are not

morally capable in actuality, they are morally capable in potentiality. Unlike the colt which will never come to possess a moral sense even if it grew into an adult (horse), children do grow to become *moral* agents on reaching adolescence: at this stage they are capable of exercising their moral sense and thus of making moral judgements. Menkiti (1984:176) in fact accepts the characterization or definition of personhood in terms of moral capacities when he says:

The various societies found in traditional Africa routinely accept this fact that personhood is the sort of thing which has to be attained, and is attained in direct proportion as one participates in communal life through the discharge of the various obligations defined by one's stations. It is the carrying out of these obligations that transforms one from the it-status of early childhoods, *marked by an absence of moral functions, into the person-status of later years, marked by a widened maturity of ethical sense – an ethical maturity without which personhood is conceived as eluding one.*

This passage surely commits Menkiti to saying that a person is defined in terms of 'some isolated static quality' – the quality of moral sense or capacity in the African case – which he thought was a characteristic of Western conceptions of personhood!

Yet to explicate personhood in terms of moral capacities is not to imply by any means that it is the community that fully defines or confers personhood, even though it can be admitted that through such activities as moral instruction, advice, admonition, and the imposition of sanctions the community can be said to play some role in a person's moral life. Moral capacities as such cannot be said to be implanted or catered for or conferred by the community.

Now, I wish to turn briefly to other forms of judgements made about persons which are not particularly moral in nature. In the communal setting of the African life, an individual's social status is measured in terms of:

- 1 A person's sense of responsibility, expressed, in turn, through his/her responsiveness and sensitivity to the needs and demands of the group.
- 2 What a person has been able to achieve through his/her own exertions – physical, intellectual, moral.
- 3 The extent to which a person fulfills certain social norms, such as having a marital life and bringing up children.

Faced with such social demands and requirements, an individual would strive in several ways to demonstrate his/her sense of personal responsibility, to achieve some measure of success in life, and to have a family (that is, immediate family). All these strivings are aimed at attaining some social status. The individual may fail in his strivings and, in the Akan community, for example, may consequently be judged as a 'useless person' (*onipa hun*), an opprobrious term. But it must be noted that what the individual would be striving for in all his/her exertions is some social status, not personhood. The strivings are in fact part of the individual's self-expression, an exercise of a capacity he/she has as a person. And even if at the end of the day the person failed to attain the expected status, his/her personhood would not for that reason diminish, even though he/she may lose social respect in the eyes of the members of the community. So that it is social status, not personhood, at which individuals could fail. Menkiti is mistaken in thinking that individuals can fail at personhood.

The foregoing arguments I have deployed are intended to prove that the view, such as held by Menkiti, that personhood is defined or conferred by the communal structure, cannot be wholly true. This is so despite the natural sociality of the human person which at once places him/her in a system of shared values and practices and a range of goals – which, in short, places him/her in a cultural structure. I have made the observation that, besides being a communitarian being by nature, the human person is, also by nature, other things as well. By 'other things', I have in mind such essential attributes

of the person as rationality, having a capacity for virtue and for evaluating and making moral judgements and, hence, being capable of choice. It is not the community that creates these attributes; it discovers and nurtures them. So that if these attributes play any seminal roles in the execution of the individual person's life style and projects, as indeed they do; then it cannot be persuasively argued that personhood is *fully* defined by the communal structure or social relationships.

It is true that the whole gamut of values and practices in which the individual is necessarily embedded is a creation of cultural community and is part of its history. For this reason, it can be said that some of our goals are set by the communal structure. Yet the following questions may be asked:

- 1 Is it possible for the communal structure to set the whole or a seamless complex of the values, practices, and ends of the individual that will perfectly reflect the complexity of human nature, values, and practices at least some of which, we know, do change and so cannot be considered monolithic?
- 2 Does the communal, and therefore cultural, character of the self really imply that the self is ineluctably and permanently held in thrall by that structure?
- 3 Does the ethos of the communal structure preempt or permanently nip in the bud a possibly radical perspective on communal values and practices that may be adopted by a self?

All of these questions can be answered in the negative. The reason is that individual persons, as participants in the shared values and practices, and enmeshed in the web of communal relationships, may find that aspects of those cultural givens are inelegant, undignifying or unenlightening, and can thoughtfully be questioned and evaluated. The evaluation may result in the individual's affirming or amending or refining existing communal goals, values, and practices; but it may or could also result in the individual's total rejection of them. The possibility of re-evaluation means, surely, that the person cannot be

absorbed by the communal or cultural apparatus, but can to some extent wriggle him/herself out of it, distance him/herself from it, and thus be in a position to take another look at it; it means, also, that the communal structure cannot foreclose the meaningfulness and reality of the quality of self-assertiveness which the person can demonstrate in his/her actions. The development of human, i.e. communal culture results from the exercise by individual persons of this capacity for self-assertion; it is this capacity which makes possible the intelligibility of autonomous individual choice of goals and life plans. The fact of the changes that do occur in the existing communal values – for some new values are evolved as some of the pristine ones fall into obsolescence – this fact is undoubtedly the result of the evaluative activities and choices of some autonomous, self-assertive individual persons.

The capacity for self-assertion which the individual can exercise presupposes, and in fact derives from, the autonomous nature of the person. By autonomy, I do not mean self-completeness, but the having of a will, a rational will of one's own, that enables one to determine at least some of one's own goals and to pursue them. (The word 'autonomy' consists of two Greek words 'autos' [self] and 'nomos' [rule]; thus, it means, self-governing, self-directing). The actions and choice of goals of the individual person emanate from his/her rational will. Thus, the self-determining is also self-assertive. The communitarian self, then, cannot be held as a cramped or shackled self acting robotically at the beck and call of the communal structure. That structure is never to be conceived as, or likened to, the Medusa head, the sight of which reduces a person to inactivity and supineness – in this case, cultural, or rational or intellectual supineness.

In concluding this section, then, I wish to say again that even though the communitarian self, such as is held in African moral and political philosophy, is not permanently detached from its contingent communal features and the individual is fully embedded or implicated in the life of his community, nevertheless the self, by virtue of – or by exploiting – its other natural attributes

(beside the natural attribute of being communal) essential to its metaphysical constitution, can from time to time take a distanced view of its communal values and practices and reassess or revise them. This possibility implies that the self can set some of its goals and, in this way, participate in the determination or definition of its own identity. The upshot is that personhood can only be partly, never completely, defined by one's membership of the community. The most that can be said, in my view, is that the person is only partly constituted by the community. This view constitutes an amendment to Menkiti's position, put forward without any qualifications that the community fully defines personhood:

... in the African understanding human community plays a crucial role in the individual's acquisition of full personhood. (Menkiti 1984:179)

Menkiti's view of communitarianism, which appears to have support in the writings of African political leaders (whose view I adumbrated in my introductory remarks), appears to chime in with unrestricted or radical or excessive communitarianism. That view differs from the one I am putting forward which is that of a restricted or moderate communitarianism. It seems to me that restricted communitarianism offers a more appropriate and adequate account of the self than the unrestricted or radical account in that the former addresses the dual features of the self: as a communal being and as an autonomous, self-determining, self-assertive being with a capacity for evaluation and choice. There are, to be sure, other reasons for preferring restricted or moderate communitarianism over unrestricted or radical communitarianism which I discuss in the section that follows.

RIGHTS, DUTIES, AND THE COMMUNAL STRUCTURE

It might be supposed that communitarianism with its emphasis on, and concern for communal

values will have no truck with the doctrine of rights, for that doctrine is necessarily an individualistic doctrine. Rights belong primarily and irreducibly to individuals; a right is the right of some individual. Yet the supposition that communitarianism will have no places or very little, if at all, for rights will be false both in theory and practice, especially in the case of restricted or moderate communitarianism.

Communitarianism will not necessarily be antithetical to the doctrine of rights for several reasons. In the first place, communitarianism cannot disallow arguments about rights which may in fact form part of the activity of a self-determining autonomous individual possessed of the capacity for evaluating or re-evaluating the entire practice of his/her community. Some of such evaluations may touch on matters of rights, the exercise of which a self-determining individual may see as conducive to the fulfilment of the human potential, and against the denial of which he/she may raise some objections.

Second, the respect for human dignity, a natural or fundamental attribute of the person which cannot, as such, be set at nought by the communal structure, generates regard for personal rights. The reason is that the natural membership of the individual person in a community cannot rob him/her of his/her dignity or worth, a fundamental and inalienable attribute he/she possesses as a person. Some conceptions of human dignity are anchored in theism, in the conviction that the dignity of the person is a natural endowment by God, the creator of humankind. One maxim of an African people whose social structure is communal has it that 'all persons are children of God; no one is a child of the earth' (*nnipa nyinaa ye Onyame nna; obiara nnye asase ba*). The insistent claim being made in the maxim that every person is a child of God does seem to have some moral overtones or relevance, grounded, as it must, on the belief that there must be something intrinsically valuable in God. A person, being a child of God, presumably by reason of having been created by him and regarded as possessing a divine spark called soul (*okra*), must be held as of intrinsic

value, an end in himself, worthy of dignity and respect. It is possible to derive a theory of individual rights from theistic conceptions of the intrinsic worth of persons. One conception of rights famously known to be grounded on an act of God is in the preamble of the American Declaration of Independence (1776). 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they *are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights ...*'

However, it is possible to derive a conception of human dignity and hence individual rights, not from theism, but from reflecting on human nature, particularly on the qualities that will dispose the human being to function at his/her best in human society and realize his/her full potentialities as a person. Thus the eighteenth-century German philosopher, Immanuel Kant, on the basis of his rational analysis, grounds the notion of human dignity or intrinsic worth on the capacity of the person for moral autonomy, i.e. rational freedom. Thus conceived, argues Kant, the person ought to be treated as an end in himself:

Now I say that man, and in general every rational being, exists as an end in himself, not merely as means for arbitrary use by this or that will: he must in all his actions, whether they are directed to himself or to other rational beings, always be viewed at the same time as an end (1965:95).

Kant thus formulates his famous Categorical Imperative, considered by him as the supreme principle of morality, also as: 'Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means but at the same time as an end' (1965:95). This leads Kant to a notion of moral rights which he refers to as 'innate rights' but which belong to everyone by nature and so could be called natural rights, which are our fundamental ethical end. Thus a conception of human dignity and moral or natural (human) rights which concomitantly flow from it can be reached through purely rational reflection on human

nature. But howsoever the conception of human dignity or rights is derived, whether from theistic considerations or from sources independent of God, that conception is linked with, and in fact compels, the recognition of rights, and not only in an individualistic but also communitarian situation. In other words, the derivation of individual rights from naturalism (humanism) or supernaturalism cannot be confined to an individualistic framework; the derivation is not an activity or a characteristic or a possibility solely of an individualistic social ambience.

Third, at both the theoretical (conceptual) and practical level, communitarianism cannot set its face against individual rights. For, implicit in communitarianism's recognition of the dual features of the self as an autonomous, self-determining entity capable of evaluation and choice and as a communal being, is a commitment to the acknowledgement of the intrinsic worth of the self and the moral rights which can be said necessarily to be due to it. The recognition by communitarian political morality of individual rights is a conceptual requirement. At the practical level communitarianism must realize that allowing free rein for the exercise of individual rights – which obviously includes the exercise of the unique qualities, talents, and dispositions of the individuals – will enhance the cultural development and success of the community. If communitarianism were to shrug off individual rights, it would not only show itself as an inconsistent moral and political theory, but in practical terms would also saw off the branch on which it was going to sit.

However, it can be said that restricted or moderate communitarianism is a consistent and viable theory, one that is not opposed to individual rights, even though it may, for a reason to be stated presently, consciously and purposively give greater attention or care to other communal values of the community. The foregoing discussion then, has, I hope, clearly shown the falsity of the view that communitarianism will have no, or very little place, for individual rights.

Having said all this, however, it must be granted that communitarianism cannot be

expected to make a fetish of rights; thus rights talk will not be brought to the front burner of its concerns and preoccupations. The reason is not far to seek; it is deriveable from the logic of the communitarian theory itself: it assumes an overwhelming concern for communal values, for the good of the wider society as such. Even so, the absorbing interest in the common good, in the provision for the social conditions which will enable each individual person to function satisfactorily in a human society, does not – should not – result in the gleeful subversion of individual rights. The reason is that even though rights belong primarily to individuals, as we said, nevertheless, insofar as their exercise will often, directly or indirectly, be valuable to the larger society, their status and roles must be recognized by communitarian theory. But the theory will disallow separating rights from the common values of the community and conferring on them a pre-eminent status. It must be noted that in any scheme of value ranking occurs or is resorted to when situations require that preferences for some values be made over other values. This is so whether the system of ethics is deontological (i.e. moderately deontological) or teleological. Thus, in the communitarian political morality, priority will not be given to rights if doing so will stand in the way of attaining a more highly ranked value or a more preferable goal of the community. Rights would not, therefore, be held as absolute in the communitarian theory, even though I think they will – in fact they should – have some place in that theory.

However, although it is conceivable, as has already been explained, that the communal structure will allow the exercise of individual rights, yet it can be expected that communitarianism would not suggest to individuals incessantly to insist on their rights. The reason, I suppose, is the assumption that rights, i.e. political, economic, social, are built into the ethos and practices of the cultural community. Thus, the economic, political, and social needs of the individual members, which are the concern of most individual rights, would be expected to have been recognized, if not catered for, to some

degree of adequacy by the communitarian structure. Individuals would not have a penchant for, an obsession with, insisting on their rights, knowing that insistence on their rights could divert attention to duties they, as members of the communal society, strongly feel towards other members of the community. Rights and duties are not polar concepts, even through they could be: if I insist on my right to all my possessions or to all that has resulted from the exercise of my endowments, I may not be able to show sensitivity to the needs and welfare of others, even though showing sensitivity to the needs of others is an important plank in the ethical platform of communitarianism. The danger or possibility of slipping down the slope of selfishness when one is totally obsessed with the idea of individual rights is, thus, quite real. In a social situation that as a matter of ethical testaments stresses social relations, concern, and compassion for others, and other communal values, insistence on rights (some rights) may not be necessary.

However, while the communitarian structure would not have a fetishistic attitude to individual rights, it would certainly have one toward duties that individual members have or ought to have toward other – perhaps the least advantaged – members of the community. The communitarian theory will expectably give priority to duties rather than rights. Concerned, as it is, with the *common good* or the communal welfare, the welfare of each and every member of the community, communitarianism will, perhaps undoubtedly, consider duty as the moral tone, as the supreme principle of morality. By 'duty', I mean task, service, conduct, or function that a person feels morally obligated to perform in respect of another person or other persons. The duties, which some members of the community feel they owe others by reason of our common humanity and should demonstrate in practice, are such as the duty to help others in distress, the duty not to harm others, and so on. Duties to the community as a whole or to some members of the community would not derive from a social

contract between individuals. The contract theory is a contrivance for voluntary, not natural, membership of the community, regarded by some people as a mere association of individuals. In a communitarian framework, however, there would be no place for the contract theory to set forth the duties and rights of individuals who are to inhabit a society that is being contemplated.

Even though such duties as caring for one another, concern for the welfare and needs of others, may not be said to be idiosyncratic to the communitarian system alone and an individualistic system can also evince or practise them, it seems to me that the pursuit of those duties in the latter system will be less spontaneous and less successful because of its obsession with individual rights. And it appears that some of the American philosopher Rawls' notions treated in his monumental work will fit better in a communitarian framework than an individualistic one which he makes the basis of his arguments. Rawls makes the following statements:

The difference principle represents, in effect, an agreement to regard the distribution of natural talents as a *common asset* (1971:101).

In justice as fairness men agree to *share* one another's fate. In designing institutions they undertake to avail themselves of the accidents of nature and social circumstance only when doing so is for the *common benefit* (1971:102).

The two principles are equivalent ... to an undertaking to regard the distribution of natural abilities as a *collective asset* so that the more fortunate are to benefit only in ways that help those who have lost out (1971:179).

The members of a community *participate in one another's nature*; we appreciate what others do as things we might have done but which they do for us (1971:565).

Rawls' language unmistakably resonates with communitarian expressions, meanings, and content.

The notions of 'sharing one another's fate', 'common assets', 'collective assets', 'common benefit', 'participating in one another's nature' – these notions and others related to them in Rawls' scheme will surely find a more ready embrace in the communitarian home than in the home artificially and instrumentally constructed by individuals in pursuit of their own egoistic advantages or ends. Those notions, it seems to me, are more appropriate, much less idealistic, for a communitarian political culture, where they will elicit greater significance and understanding and less philosophical controversy or resistance, than in a system, like Rawls', which seeks to give priority to individual rights rather than to duties. The point I am at pains to make, in other words, is that Rawls' essentially individualistic frameworks determinedly poised to secure and cordon off individual rights, can hardly provide an effective support for those 'communitarian notions' he so well articulates, let alone bring them to practical realization.

The question may be raised as to the justification for giving priority to duties over rights in the communitarian political morality. The priority is, I think, based on, and is most probably required by, the demands of the relational character of the person in the wake of his natural sociality. The sociality of the person immediately makes him/her naturally oriented to other persons with whom he/she must live in relation. Living in relation with others directly involves a person in social and moral roles, duties, obligations, and commitments which the individual person must fulfil. The natural relationality of the person thus immediately plunges him/her into a moral universe, making morality an essentially social and trans-individual phenomenon focused on the well-being of others. Our natural sociality then prescribes or mandates a morality that, clearly, should be weighted on duty, i.e. on that which one has to do for others.

The success that must accrue to communal or corporative living depends very much on each member of the community demonstrating a high degree of moral responsiveness and sensi-

tivity in relation to the needs and well-being of other members. This should manifest itself in each member's pursuit of his/her duties. Also, the common good, which is an outstanding goal of the communitarian moral and political philosophy, requires that each individual should work for the good of all. The social and ethical values of social well-being, solidarity, interdependence, cooperation, compassion, and reciprocity, which can be said to characterize the communitarian morality, primarily impose on the individual a duty to the community and its members. It is all these considerations that elevate the notion of duties to a priority status in the whole enterprise of communitarian life.

It is often said that rights are correlated with duties, that if there are rights, then there must be corresponding duties, and vice-versa. This hackneyed statement seems to me not to be wholly true, certainly not true in aspects of moral relationships between individuals, or in cases where individuals feel they owe their community some duty or duties. It is true that if I have a right to education, then, it is the duty of someone, a parent or a local authority or the state, to provide what is necessary for my education; similarly, if I have the right to work it is the duty of the state to make jobs available for me. In such cases, where rights are asserted against the state or against some persons in specific roles or positions, the correspondence or correlation between rights and duties will clearly be on track. However, it is possible for a person to carry out a duty to someone else without our having to say that the duty was carried out because of the right of this other person, that is, the person for whose sake the duty was done. Here I am not thinking of what is called an act of supererogation – an act that a person does not have to do, even though it would be morally commendable if he/she did it. I am thinking, rather, of an act that a person morally feels he/she should do, and does it. It seems to me that communitarian ethics will rightly obliterate the distinction between duties and so-called supererogatory acts or acts of charity, and consider all of them as our moral duties. If I carry out a duty to help someone in

distress, I would not be doing so because I think that someone has a right against me, a right I should help fulfil. I would be carrying out that duty because I consider that person as worthy of some moral consideration by me, as someone to whose plight I ought to be morally sensitive. (I am here not referring to duties enjoined upon persons by reason of certain specific social roles, positions or statuses they occupy in society.)

When we want to carry out some duties, especially of the positive kind, such as providing some aid to someone in distress looking after aged parents, conferring benefits, we do not first ask ourselves whether the persons to whom we owe those duties have any rights against us and whether we should perform those duties because of their rights. People in societies in which the concept of rights has not gained (much) currency in their moral or political vocabulary, would carry out their duties to their fellow human beings, yet without the conviction that the latter have rights against them. Our positive duties toward others, then, are not based on their rights: it is not so much a consciousness of the rights of others as our moral responsiveness to their particular situations that impinges on our decision to carry out our duties toward them. This, I think, is generally true, and would be very much so in a social structure like the communitarian, which does not lay any particular stress on rights. A rider is, however, required here: negative duties, such as not to harm others, to refrain from killing or robbing others, do have corresponding rights. For, one's right not to be harmed imposes a duty on others not to harm one. Even so, it can be concluded that the correlation between rights and positive duties collapses and becomes a one-way, asymmetric relation, for as I have explained, there are duties without corresponding rights, as far as the individual moral agent is concerned. The upshot of the foregoing discussion is that it is possible for communitarian ethics to hold the moral status of duties in high esteem without this being mandated or induced by a consciousness of rights.

Yet in stressing duties to the community and its members rather than the rights of the indi-

vidual members of the community, the communitarian political and moral theory does not imply, by any means, that rights are not important; neither does it deny duties to the self. As pointed out earlier in this section, communitarianism acknowledges the intrinsic value of the person and the moral rights that the acknowledgement can be said to entail.

Individual rights, such as the right to equal treatment, to our property, to freely associate with others, to free speech, and others, would be recognized by communitarianism, especially of the restricted or moderate type. However, in the light of the overwhelming emphasis on duties within the communitarian moral framework, rights would not be given priority over the values of duty and so would not be considered inviolable or indefeasible: it might on this showing, be appropriate occasionally to override some individual rights for the sake of protecting the good of the community itself. As an autonomous, self-determining being, the individual person must, within limits, care for his/her well-being or needs just as he/she cares for the needs of others. Altruistic duties cannot obliterate duties to oneself. This is because the pursuit of altruistic duties does not lead to the dissolution of the self. The individual person has a life to live, and so must have plans for his/her life and must see to the realization of those plans. The attainment of the goal imposes on the self the responsibility or duty to develop one's natural abilities. Therefore, the duty one has toward the community and its members does not – should not – enjoin one to give over one's whole life and be oblivious of one's personal well-being.

What the communitarian ethic will enjoin, then, is dual responsibility, a proposal – or better, an imperative – which on more than one occasion will be consistent in every way with the *dual* features of the human being I referred to earlier. The successful pursuit of the dual responsibility requires that, through the development of one's capacities and through one's own exertions and strivings, and hence through self-attention, the individual person should

him/herself attain some appropriate status socially, economically, intellectually, and so on. One is not saying that all the needs or interests of the individual person should be taken care of before he/she embarks on his/her duties and commitments to others. Yet it is surely a necessary requirement that the individual be in a position to do so – hence the need to carry out duties to him/herself. If the notion of duties to oneself, if self-attention, makes sense even in a communitarian context, as I maintain, so does the notion of individual rights, which, as a reflexive notion, must be conceptually linked to that of self-interest or, as I prefer to say, self-attention.

CONCLUSION

Communitarian ethical and political theory, which considers the community as a fundamental human good, advocates a life lived in harmony and cooperation with others, a life of mutual consideration and aid and of interdependence, a life in which one shares in the fate of the other – bearing one another up – a life which provides a viable framework for the fulfilment of the individual's nature or potentials, a life in which the products of the exercise of an individual's talents or endowments are (nevertheless) regarded as the assets of the community as such, a life free from hostility and confrontation: such a life, according to the theory, is most rewarding and fulfilling.

It is the moderate or restricted version of communitarianism that, to my mind, is defensible and which I support and have argued for in this reading. It is not too clear which of the two versions, if any, is espoused in African cultural traditions. But the position I have taken generally appears to run counter to that of the African political leaders whose writings in the period following the attainment of political independence unmistakably suggest a radical or extreme type of communitarianism traced by them to African cultural traditions.

Moderate or restricted communitarianism gives accommodation, as has been shown, to communal values as well as to values of individuality, to social commitments as well as to duties of self-attention. Even though in its basic thrust and concerns it gives prominence to duties toward the community and its members, it does not – cannot – do so to the detriment of individual rights whose existence and value it recognizes, or should recognize, and for a good reason. I believe strongly that an ethical and political theory that combines the appreciation of, as well as commitments to, the community as a fundamental value, and the understanding of, as well as commitment to, the idea of individual rights will be a most plausible theory to support. Guided by the assumptions about the dual features of the self with an implied dual responsibility, it should be possible to deflate any serious tension between the self and its community.