

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Exploring how African Philosophy Subsumes the Subjective Personhood under Community

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Abstract

This article explores the concept of personhood within African philosophy, contrasting it with Western individualistic frameworks. It highlights how African philosophical traditions, particularly through the lens of Ubuntu and communalism, subsume individual identity under the broader fabric of community and relationality. The study traces the evolution of personhood from ancient Greek thought to modern philosophical discourse, noting a shift from communal existence to an emphasis on autonomy and rationality in Western thought. In contrast, African philosophy asserts that human identity is intrinsically linked to communal relationships and moral responsibilities. This relational understanding challenges conventional notions of individuality and autonomy, suggesting that ethical considerations are grounded in communal well-being and the collective good. The article finally invites a re-evaluation of personhood that transcends cultural boundaries, emphasizing the interdependence of individuals within their communities.

Keywords: Ubuntu, Personhood, Identity, Community, Individualism.

1. Introduction

Philosophical inquiries into human personhood have historically traversed diverse cultural landscapes, yielding varied conceptualizations of what it means to be a human being. Western philosophy, emphasizing autonomy, rationality, and individual rights, often views personhood through a lens of self-assertion and independence. Contrastingly, African philosophy underscores the centrality of community, relationality, and interconnectedness in shaping human identity and moral worth. This divergence illuminates the profound influence of cultural paradigms on philosophical conceptions of personhood.

This study interrogates how African philosophy subsumes the individual subject within the community fabric, emphasizing the relational conception of personhood exemplified through concepts such as Ubuntu and communalism. It aims to unravel the philosophical underpinnings that position human identity as inherently dependent on communal

relationships, thereby contrasting this with Western individualistic frameworks. Such exploration is vital for enriching contemporary debates on human identity, moral agency, and social responsibility across cultural boundaries.

2. Background of the Study

The concept of personhood has undergone significant evolution throughout history, reflecting diverse philosophical traditions and cultural contexts. This discourse can be traced from the rationalism of ancient Greek thought to the individualistic tendencies of modern philosophy, with each epoch underscoring distinct attributes that define human nature. In ancient Greece, Aristotle's characterization of humans as *zoon politikon*, or political animals, established a foundational understanding of personhood deeply embedded in communal existence.¹ Aristotle posits that human rationality and sociality are inextricably

¹Aristotle. *Politics*. Translated by Benjamin Jowett. (New York: Modern Library, 1943), 9.

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intertwined with community life, suggesting that personhood is not merely an isolated artifact of individual capabilities but rather a quality that emerges through active engagement in social relations and political structures.

During the Scholastic period, the discourse shifted with thinkers such as Boethius, who articulated the definition of a person as *natura rationalis individua substantia*, or a rational substance (Boethius). This definition emphasizes the dual significance of rationality and metaphysical substance, suggesting that true personhood is constituted by both cognitive abilities and a substantive existence that is recognized within a larger metaphysical framework. With the advent of modern philosophy, figures like René Descartes and John Locke redirected the conversation toward consciousness, self-awareness, and psychological continuity. These philosophers positioned the internal mental states of individuals as central to the understanding of personhood, thereby fostering a notion of autonomy that is intimately tied to individual cognition and subjective experience.²

In contrast, African philosophical thought presents a relational paradigm that foregrounds community life as the essence of personhood. Central to this perspective is the African philosophical concept of Ubuntu, which encapsulates the aphorism “I am because we are.”³ This principle advocates that individual identities are intrinsically linked to the communal fabric, positing that personhood is realized through active participation in communal structures and relationships. Scholars such as Ifeanyi Menkiti, John Mbiti, and Kwame Gyekye articulate that personhood in African ontology is fundamentally realized through moral responsibilities and shared cultural values embedded within community life. They argue that the community is not a mere backdrop but an active participant in the constitution of personhood, fostering interdependence and mutual recognition among individuals.⁴ This collective approach not only emphasizes the interrelation between the individual and the community but also challenges the Western philosophical emphasis on autonomous selfhood.

The implications of this relational understanding of personhood extend into crucial domains such as African

ethics, social organization, and identity formation. The communal framework, as articulated by African philosophers, posits that ethical considerations and moral agency are understood through the lens of communal wellbeing and the collective good. This challenges and redefines contemporary notions of individuality, autonomy, and moral responsibility by foregrounding the community as the primary context within which personhood is actualized.

Western concepts of personhood typically prioritize individual autonomy and rational self-determination, whereas African philosophical traditions emphasize the importance of communal relationships and collective identity. This contrast prompts critical inquiries into the universality of personhood and its cultural dependencies, particularly concerning whether the African philosophical inclination to subsume the subjective individual within the community effectively diminishes personal agency or instead fosters social harmony. Scholarly discourse also examines the potential for communalism to overshadow individual rights, potentially generating social conformity that compromises personal freedoms. Thus, this study aims to investigate how African philosophy conceptualizes personhood through a relational lens and to evaluate whether this subsumption is consistent with or challenges the principles of individual moral agency and self-determination. In doing so, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of cultural perspectives on personhood, advocating for the acknowledgment of the African relational paradigm as a counter to the prevailing narrative of Western individualism. Such insights are not only crucial for enhancing intercultural dialogue but also for informing cross-cultural ethics and crafting inclusive social policies that honor diverse philosophical frameworks.

3. Philosophical Foundations of Personhood in African Thought

Understanding the subsumption of the individual subject under community in African philosophy necessitates a deep engagement with its metaphysical and anthropological foundations. Central to this is the African conception of personhood as inherently relational, a view that challenges Western notions of autonomous selfhood. This chapter explores key philosophical concepts such as Ubuntu, the role of community in moral development, and the metaphysical understanding of the person as embedded within a web of relationships.

²Rene Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy with Selections from Objections and Replies*, trans. Michael Moriarty (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 19.

³John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (New York: Anchor Books, 1970), 141.

⁴Kwame Gyekye, *Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on The African Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 45-46

3.1 The Concept of Ubuntu

Ubuntu, a term rooted in the Nguni Bantu languages, encapsulates a complex worldview that emphasizes interconnectedness, compassion, and shared humanity. At the heart of Ubuntu lies the phrase, *Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, which translates to “a person is a person through other persons.”⁵ This expression articulates the foundational idea that individual identity is fundamentally relational, suggesting that one’s existence and self-concept are inextricably linked to the community and the social bonds that one cultivates.⁶ This relational notion of self is a cornerstone of many African ethical systems, which prioritize communal harmony and collective moral responsibility over individualistic pursuits.⁷

Philosopher Desmond Tutu, a prominent advocate for Ubuntu, explicates it as a philosophy that cultivates mutual respect and empathy among individuals. He asserts that one’s humanity is affirmed and validated through the recognition and acknowledgment from others.⁸ In his view, Ubuntu challenges the Western philosophical tradition that often elevates individual autonomy above collective well-being, proposing instead that social interdependence is vital to human dignity and fulfillment.

Similarly, Nigerian scholar Okechukwu Oguejiofor elaborates on Ubuntu as a moral philosophy that underscores communal participation as essential to personhood.⁹ He argues that this framework fosters an ethical approach where individuals are encouraged to act not solely for their own benefit but in consideration of the community’s welfare. This promotes a sense of shared responsibility and ethical accountability among community members.

While the emphasis of Ubuntu on relationality paves the way for a rich understanding of identity and community dynamics, it concurrently raises pertinent questions regarding individual autonomy. Critics posit that this profound focus on community may inadvertently diminish personal agency, making individuals overly dependent on social validation. They argue that an excessive emphasis on communal values might suppress individual rights and self-expression, leading to a conformity that undermines

personal freedoms. Conversely, proponents of Ubuntu contend that true personhood is realized through moral engagement and responsibilities towards others, thus redefining agency within a communal context. They argue that individual autonomy does not have to be sacrificed in the pursuit of communal harmony; rather, the two can coexist in a balanced manner that fosters both individual growth and collective well-being.¹⁰ This perspective encourages a re-examination of the traditional notions of autonomy, suggesting that an individual’s freedom is intricately tied to their relationships and commitments to their community.

3.2 Community as the Basis of Moral and Social Identity

In African philosophical discourse, the concept of morality is profoundly embedded within the communal fabric of society. This perspective emphasizes that ethical norms are not simply individual constructs but are instead derived from the collective cultural values that prevail within a community. In this view, morality is inherently relational, rooted in the interconnectedness of individuals as part of a larger social embroidery. Renowned scholar John S. Mbiti (1969) reinforces this idea by highlighting that moral responsibilities extend well beyond personal conduct; they encompass obligations toward fellow community members and the broader social environment.¹¹ He argues that the health and well-being of the individual cannot be perceived in isolation but must be understood as intrinsically linked to the welfare of the community. This relationality suggests that the flourishing of one’s personal life is interdependent with the communal health, thereby reinforcing the notion that ethical considerations are inextricably tied to the shared experiences and collective survival of the group.

Moreover, the African philosophical approach to morality often incorporates a strong sense of duty to ancestors and future generations, thus extending ethical obligations into a temporal continuum. This acknowledgment of communal lineage further intensifies the moral framework, as individuals are seen as stewards of cultural values and practices that must be upheld for the sake of their community’s integrity and continuity. In practical terms, this communal perspective on morality manifests in various social practices, rituals, and communal decision-making processes where the consensus is often sought to

⁵Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 141.

⁶Kagame, *The Meaning of Ubuntu: The African Philosophy of Humanity*, 45

⁷Nussbaum, *Capabilities as Fundamental Entitlements: Sen and Social Justice*, 90

⁸Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*. (New York: Doubleday, 1999). 34

⁹Cf. O. Oguejiofor, *Ubuntu: A Philosophy for the Humanisation of the African Experience*, 129

¹⁰ Cf. Metz, *A Relational Moral Theory: African Ethics in and Beyond the Continent* (United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2022), 89.

¹¹Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 111.

ensure that ethical norms resonate with the collective good. Thus, African moral philosophy insists on a holistic understanding of ethical behavior, where one's actions are weighed not just by personal ethics but by their impact on the community's harmony and overall social cohesion.

Menkiti further develops this idea by describing the person as a "center of moral and social relations,"¹² suggesting that individual identity is shaped and cultivated through meaningful engagement in social interactions. This relational view of personhood indicates that one's moral development is not merely an individual endeavor but is significantly influenced by the dynamics of social cohesion, mutual respect, and collective well-being. Menkiti argues that the ethical dimensions of personal identity emerge through participation in communal life, where individual actions and decisions are invariably conditioned by the expectations of the social group.

Consequently, this framework implies that individual moral choices are not made in a vacuum; rather, they are deeply embedded within the expectations and values of the community. The interdependence of personal identity and morality necessitates that deviations from established communal norms may jeopardize social harmony.¹³ This relational construct of morality emphasizes the importance of accountability to the community, indicating that personal ethics cannot be divorced from communal obligations.¹⁴ Thus, the African understanding of morality challenges the individualistic paradigms prevalent in Western thought and highlights the essential role of communal ties in shaping ethical behavior and identity.

3.3 The Metaphysics of Personhood: Embodiment and Relationality

African metaphysics often presents an understanding of personhood that transcends mere biological definitions, emphasizing the embodied and relational dimensions of human existence. According to Gyekye (1992), personhood is not merely a biological fact; rather, it encompasses a moral and relational reality that is actualized through social engagement and interdependence within the community.¹⁵ This perspective aligns with the assertion that individuals attain their personhood not in isolation but through interactions and relationships with others.

¹²Menkiti, Ifeanyi A. "Person and Community in African Traditional Thought," *Philosophy and African Culture*, (1977), 44.

¹³Cf. Menkiti, "Person and Community in African Traditional Thought," 45

¹⁴Cf. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 123.

¹⁵Gyekye, *Tradition and Modernity*, 46

In traditional African cosmological frameworks, human beings are viewed as integral components of a larger, interconnected cosmos, which includes ancestors, spiritual entities, and the natural environment. This holistic understanding posits that individuals are not isolated entities but rather nodes within a complex web of relationships, where every action resonates throughout the community and beyond.¹⁶ Such a view is echoed in the works of philosophers like Wiredu, who argue that personhood in African thought is inherently linked to communal values and the collective well-being of society.¹⁷

The philosophical significance of this metaphysical stance is profound, as it challenges the Cartesian dualism that has dominated Western thought, which typically separates mind and body into distinct categories. Instead, African metaphysics advocates for a more integrated view of personhood, where individuals are shaped by and actively participate in social and spiritual bonds. This perspective underscores the importance of relationality in understanding the essence of being human, suggesting that personhood is rooted not only in individual attributes but also in the quality and depth of one's relationships with others and the broader cosmos.

4. The Subsumption of the Subjective Person in African Philosophy

Building on the metaphysical foundations, this section examines how African philosophy subsumes individual subjectivity within community, analyzing the philosophical arguments that articulate this subsumption and its ethical ramifications.

4.1 The Person as a Relational Entity

In the context of African philosophy, personhood is conceptualized not as an inherent or autonomous quality of an individual but rather as a status that is bestowed through relational engagement within a community. This perspective is significantly articulated by Gyekye (1992), who posits that personhood encompasses the embodiment of virtues such as respect, benevolence, and social responsibility, which are intrinsically linked to one's interactions with others.¹⁸ He argues that individual identity cannot be fully understood in isolation; it is the relational networks and social responsibilities that define a person's status within a community. Moreover, Menkiti (1984) expands on this idea by asserting that the individual is

¹⁶Cf. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 89.

¹⁷Nontobeko Moyo, Otrude. *Africanity and Ubuntu as Decolonizing Discourse*. (Germany: Springer International Publishing, 2021), 159.

¹⁸Cf. Gyekye, *Tradition and Modernity*, 49

better understood as a “becoming,” a continuous process that is shaped and sustained by interpersonal relationships and moral commitments.¹⁹ He contends that personhood is not a static state to be achieved but rather a dynamic journey that evolves through social participation and community values. This notion highlights the importance of communal ties over individualistic conceptions of identity, differing markedly from Western philosophical frameworks that often emphasize fixed and intrinsic attributes of personhood.

In African philosophical traditions, the concept of personal identity is viewed as fluid, interconnected, and deeply influenced by context, standing in stark contrast to the more rigid and often individualistic frameworks commonly seen in Western understandings of personhood. Central to this perspective is the notion of relationality, which asserts that an individual’s identity is not an isolated construct but is profoundly shaped by their moral responsibilities and social interactions within their community. This belief highlights that one’s sense of self is derived from collective experiences and shared obligations, emphasizing that personhood is inextricably linked to the relationships one nurtures with family, friends, and the broader social fabric. Such a framework invites a critical examination and rethinking of how identities are formed and perceived across various cultural landscapes. It encourages a more open-minded and comprehensive understanding of human existence, one that appreciates the complexity and richness that emerges from relationships and communal ties. By recognizing the integral role of interactions and the social environment, this perspective calls for a reevaluation of our definitions of personhood, fostering inclusivity and highlighting the importance of connection in the human experience.

4.2 The Role of the Community in Shaping Identity

The concept of community serves as a pivotal moral and social framework that fundamentally confers personhood upon the individual. According to the African philosopher John Mbiti, “A person is a person because of other persons. Without community, the individual cannot fully realize or affirm their personhood.”²⁰ This assertion emphasizes the integral relationship between the individual and the collective, positing that individual self-awareness and moral agency are inherently derived from active participation in communal life.

¹⁹Cf. Menkiti, “Person and Community in African Traditional Thought,” 142

²⁰Cf. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 141.

This perspective challenges the traditional Western notion of the autonomous individual by highlighting that personhood is not an isolated attribute. Instead, it is deeply embedded in the context of social relationships and communal interdependence. The subject’s consciousness is, therefore, intertwined with communal recognition and the moral obligations that arise from these relationships. As noted by later scholars, the emphasis on community as the foundation of identity and moral value underscores the notion that one’s existence and ethical standing are validated through the acknowledgment of others within the communal sphere.²¹

Moreover, this communal framework fosters a collective moral responsibility, implying that individuals are not merely self-directed entities but rather participants in a larger ethical tapestry. As such, ethical behavior and personhood are cultivated through the dynamics of social interaction, obligation, and shared values within the community. Consequently, the understanding of human existence extends beyond individual experience to encompass a broader dialogical relationship that shapes identity and moral character.²²

4.3 Ethical and Moral Dimensions of Subsumption

The conceptual framework of subsumption posits that the recognition of subjective personhood is inherently linked to one’s membership within a community, which fundamentally reframes moral development and ethical responsibility as collective enterprises. In this paradigm, individuals are not morally accountable solely on personal grounds; rather, they engage in a web of ethical obligations that arise from their integration within their social milieu.²³ This perspective underscores the interdependence of individual actions and community well-being, suggesting that moral considerations extend beyond personal autonomy to encompass the collective welfare. Moreover, Gyekye argues that this collectivist approach to ethics fosters social harmony and moral solidarity, allowing for the cultivation of shared virtues and communal responsibilities. By emphasizing shared moral values, communities can create a sense of belonging and reinforce social cohesion, which is essential for promoting a stable and just society. This alignment of individual morality with communal expectations can engender a supportive environment in which ethical behaviors are recognized and nurtured collectively.

²¹Cf. Mogobe B. Ramose, “The Philosophy of Ubuntu,” in *African Philosophy through Ubuntu*, (2002), 56.

²²K. Wiredu, (1996). *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective*. (Indiana University Press), 139.

²³Cf. Gyekye, *Tradition and Modernity*, 57.

However, the subsumption of individual rights under community norms introduces potential tensions that warrant scrutiny. Critics, such as Appiah (2005), have raised concerns about the risk of suppressing individual rights and dissenting voices in the name of communal harmony.²⁴ This critique highlights the challenge of negotiating the delicate balance between fostering communal unity and safeguarding individual moral autonomy. If community norms are prioritized to the detriment of personal rights, the result can be a homogenization of ethical perspectives that stifles diversity and critical discourse.²⁵

The ethical landscape influenced by the concept of subsumption requires a sophisticated understanding of how to balance the interests of the community with the moral autonomy of the individual. It is essential to develop a comprehensive framework that not only recognizes and values the diverse perspectives and voices within a society but also fosters a collective moral evolution. This approach aims to achieve social cohesion while safeguarding individual rights and embracing ethical diversity. By doing so, we can create an environment where the goals of unity and collaboration do not undermine personal freedoms or the richness of varying ethical viewpoints. Effective dialogue, empathetic engagement, and a commitment to inclusivity are fundamental components in this endeavor, ensuring that each person's moral agency is honored even as we strive for a united collective.

5. Comparative Perspectives: African Relational Personhood and Western Individualism

Contrasting African philosophical notions of personhood with Western individualist paradigms reveals fundamental differences in understanding the human subject, moral agency, and social organization.

5.1 Western Conceptions of Personhood

The landscape of Western philosophical thought, particularly in the wake of René Descartes' contributions in the 17th century, has significantly centered around the concept of the autonomous, rational self as the cornerstone of personhood. Descartes' renowned declaration, *Cogito, ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am), serves as a pivotal affirmation of the importance of self-awareness and rational cognition in shaping individual identity.²⁶ This philosophical stance posits that the essence of being human is encapsulated in

our capacity for thought and reflection. Within this intellectual framework, the individual emerges as a self-sufficient being, endowed with intrinsic rights and moral agency that stem from their ability to engage in reasoning and self-examination.²⁷ This perspective implies that personhood is not merely about existing but involves an active, conscious engagement with one's thoughts and the world around them. Thus, the values attributed to individuals, including autonomy and moral responsibility, are deeply rooted in this rationalist tradition that highlights the role of conscious deliberation in the formulation of both identity and ethical considerations.

John Locke significantly expands upon the notion of personal identity in his philosophical writings, particularly in the context of his theory. He argues that psychological continuity and self-awareness are essential components for establishing what it means to be a person. In his seminal work from 1690, Locke asserts that it is the uninterrupted flow of consciousness, rather than merely the physical substance of the body or the immaterial essence of the soul, that fundamentally supports an individual's identity with time.²⁸ This emphasis on psychological elements not only reflects the Enlightenment's core ideals of individualism and rational thought but also underscores the belief that moral responsibility and personal identity are deeply intertwined with one's ability for introspective reasoning and reflective thought. Thus, for Locke, it is through the continuity of our thoughts, memories, and experiences that we maintain a stable sense of self, emphasizing the significance of mental processes in determining who we are as individuals throughout our lives.²⁹

The ramifications of these philosophical concepts reach far beyond abstract theoretical discussions; they profoundly influence modern debates concerning ethics, human rights, and legal obligations. A core tenet rooted in the belief in the rational and autonomous individual serves as a foundational element in various Western legal structures and moral frameworks. This belief highlights the critical significance of individual consent, which is paramount in areas ranging from medical ethics to contractual agreements, as well as the notions of accountability and personal agency that shape diverse social interactions. These principles are woven into the fabric of legal systems, illustrating how they govern not only interpersonal relationships

²⁴Cf. K.A. Appiah. (2005). *Ethics in a World of Strangers*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company), 34.

²⁵Cf. Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars*, 113.

²⁶Cf. Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, 19.

²⁷Cf. Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for The Metaphysics of Morals*, ed. Allen W. Wood (London: Yale University Press, 2002), 35.

²⁸Cf. John Locke, *On Human Understanding*, trans. E. J. Lowe (London: New York, 1995), 103.

²⁹Cf. Locke, *On Human Understanding*, 103.

but also institutional policies and societal norms. By emphasizing the centrality of the individual, these ideas advocate for a society that values personal freedom and ethical responsibility in a wide array of contexts.

5.2 African Relational Personhood

As seen previously, African philosophy articulates a distinctive understanding of personhood that is fundamentally relational, positing that an individual's identity and existence are intricately woven into the fabric of their community. This perspective emphasizes that personhood is not an isolated status but rather a condition defined by one's relationships, moral obligations, and spiritual connections with others.³⁰ In many African cultures, the notion of community is paramount, functioning as the primary locus of individual identity. Rather than prioritizing the autonomy of the individual, African relationality highlights the importance of social harmony and collective identity, suggesting that one's worth is intrinsically linked to their contributions and responsibilities within the group.³¹

Consequently, in this relational framework, moral responsibilities extend beyond the self, encompassing duties to family, community, and ancestors. Such ethical considerations foster a sense of interdependence, where the well-being of the community often takes precedence over individual desires.³² This understanding of personhood resonates with the concept of Ubuntu, which encapsulates the idea that "I am because we are," illustrating the fundamental interconnectedness of individuals within their social contexts.³³

5.3 Philosophical and Ethical Implications

The divergent paradigms of Western individualism and African relationality have profound implications for concepts of rights, justice, and moral responsibility. Western thought, deeply rooted in Enlightenment principles, tends to prioritize individual rights and freedoms as foundational to the social contract.³⁴ This perspective posits that the individual is the primary unit of analysis in ethical deliberation, thereby emphasizing personal autonomy and self-determination.

³⁰Cf. Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars*, 115.

³¹Cf. A.A. An-Na'im, (1992). *Toward an Islamic Reformation: Civil Liberties, Human Rights, and International Law*. (Syracuse University Press), 67.

³²Cf. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 141.

³³Cf. Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*. (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 133.

³⁴Cf. Locke, *On Human Understanding*, 113.

In stark contrast, African relationality reframes the discourse around rights and justice by foregrounding social duties and communal well-being. It challenges the notion of individualism by advocating for a model of justice that recognizes collective responsibility and the interconnectedness of all individuals. In this context, moral responsibilities are viewed as communal obligations that foster social cohesion, thereby promoting a holistic approach to justice that attributes significance to both individual rights and collective welfare.³⁵

Thus, the philosophical and ethical implications arising from these contrasting paradigms encourage an understanding of moral responsibility. They invite deeper reflections on how rights can be balanced with duties, and how individual freedoms can coexist with the collective good, ultimately contributing to a more integrated approach to justice and ethical deliberation in diverse cultural contexts.³⁶

6. Critical Engagement and Contemporary Relevance

This section critically evaluates the implications of African philosophy's subsumption of personhood within the context of community, especially considering contemporary debates surrounding human rights, social cohesion, and cultural identity. African philosophy, which often emphasizes relationality and communal ties, presents a unique lens through which to analyze these pressing issues.³⁷

The relational paradigm inherent in African philosophy offers several strengths that are particularly relevant in contemporary society. Central to many African philosophical traditions is the idea that individual well-being is inextricably linked to the well-being of the community. This perspective fosters a sense of moral responsibility among individuals, promoting social harmony and solidarity. As Mbiti famously stated, "I am because we are," encapsulating the belief that individual identity is fundamentally intertwined with community identity.

The relational paradigm acknowledges the crucial role of community in shaping moral development. The relational approach emphasizes that community plays an essential role in fostering moral values and guiding ethical behavior. By identifying the community as a

³⁵Cf. A. Mbuyiseni, (2014). "Ubuntu and the Politics of the Post-Apartheid State" in *African Studies Quarterly*, 15(3), 65.

³⁶Cf. K. Nkrumah, (1966). *Consciencism: Philosophy and Ideology for De-Colonization*. (Panaf Books), 78.

³⁷Cf. Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars*, 105.

central figure in the process of moral development, this perspective encourages a collective understanding of ethical practices that are deeply rooted in cultural contexts. This communal engagement not only strengthens interpersonal relationships but also cultivates a shared moral framework that reflects the diverse experiences and traditions within the community.³⁸ Such a foundation allows for a more inclusive approach to ethics, where values are not imposed from a distance but are nurtured within the context of local customs and social interactions.

The relational paradigm honors cultural diversity and indigenous perspectives. Embracing a wide array of cultural viewpoints plays a vital role in ensuring that indigenous worldviews are not only recognized but also woven into the fabric of larger ethical dialogues. This commitment to respecting and valuing diversity is especially important in our increasingly multicultural societies, where the interplay of various ethical frameworks can lead to significant clashes and misunderstandings. By integrating the philosophies and practices of indigenous communities into mainstream discussions, we not only enrich our understanding of ethics but also foster a more inclusive environment that acknowledges the complexities and nuances of different cultural narratives.³⁹

The relational paradigm, while offering significant benefits in fostering community and collective well-being, is not without its challenges and criticisms that warrant careful examination. A major concern is the potential for an overemphasis on communal ties to suppress individual rights and dissenting voices; critics argue that the insistence on conformity to community norms could stifle personal freedoms and curtail individual expression.⁴⁰ This inclination towards prioritizing the collective may cultivate a culture of social conformity, pressuring individuals to align their personal beliefs with collective values, often at the expense of their individuality, which can result in a homogenized moral landscape that disregards the richness of diverse perspectives.⁴¹ The ongoing tension between communal obligations and personal liberties underscores the complexities inherent in navigating cultural expectations within diverse societies. Striking a balance between these competing demands is a nuanced challenge, requiring a careful deliberation of how personal rights can be

preserved in the face of societal pressures. This duality highlights the necessity for ongoing dialogue about the implications of relational dynamics on personal autonomy and community cohesion.

In an increasingly globalized world, the integration of African relational notions of personhood with universal human rights frameworks presents a nuanced approach to multicultural ethics and social justice. By drawing from African philosophical traditions, which emphasize interconnectedness and relational ethics, contemporary discourses on human rights can become more inclusive and context-specific.⁴² This synthesis not only enriches the global human rights dialogue but also allows for a more profound understanding of cultural identity in the face of globalization, advocating for a model of social justice that honors both universal principles and local customs. As we navigate complex social landscapes, the incorporation of these ideas may hold the key to fostering greater understanding and collaboration across diverse communities.

7. Conclusion

This study has examined the philosophical underpinnings of the subsumption of subjective personhood under community in African philosophy. It has been demonstrated that this paradigm emphasizes relationality, moral responsibility, and social harmony, contrasting sharply with Western individualist notions. While offering rich insights into human identity and ethics, it also presents challenges regarding individual rights and autonomy. Recognizing and integrating these diverse perspectives can foster more inclusive and culturally sensitive approaches to human dignity and social ethics.

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³⁸Cf. Nkrumah, Neo-Colonialism, 78.

³⁹Cf. W. Soyinka, (2000). *The Open Sore of a Continent: A Personal Narrative of the Nigerian Crisis*. (Oxford University Press), 101.

⁴⁰Cf. Appiah, *Ethics in a World of Strangers*, 34.

⁴¹Cf. M. Mamdani, (2004). *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism*. (Princeton University Press), 34

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