

UNITED WISDOM

African Philosophies of Personhood: Several Different Answers

World and Consciousness

Andrey Zarinsh & Maria Evilkut

W-20-N01 · EN

@andrey.zarinsh @ilkutki

African Philosophies of Personhood: Several Different Answers

Imagine a hypothetical scene. A family helped a young person get an education and now expects them to choose work close to home. They are grateful but want to leave. A relative says, “We made you who you are.” The young person replies, “Even so, I should decide my own life.” Both statements may contain an important truth. Yet a question remains between acknowledging dependence and claiming authority over another person.

This scene does not depict a “typical African family.” It is our thought experiment about the tension between belonging and autonomy. African philosophers have proposed several ways of thinking about that tension. Their dispute is more interesting than the convenient contrast in which a whole continent speaks of community while the rest of the world speaks only of separate individuals.

What this article explores

We will consider several positions in African debates about personhood: communal becoming in Ifeanyi Menkiti, Kwame Gyekye’s moderate communitarianism, and the important distinction between a human being and a moral ideal of personhood. John Mbiti’s formulation will appear in the context of Menkiti’s use of it, without turning one phrase into the voice of every African society.

The article’s central question is what conclusions actually follow from our dependence on others. The social origins of language, skills, and identity do not yet determine the limits of a community’s authority. Recognising individual rights does not make someone self-sufficient. We must distinguish moral development, belonging, dignity, and recognition. Contemporary hypothetical examples will test these distinctions in disagreement, migration, care for a dependent person, and conflicting duties. This is philosophical reflection, not a description of one African character or instructions for judging someone else’s maturity.

1. Why the title needs a plural

“African philosophy” cannot hold one ready-made answer about human beings. Even the authors discussed here disagree about how far community determines personhood and how duties relate to rights. We read particular arguments rather than establish a continent’s defining property.

@andrey.zarinsh @ilkutki

In “Person and Community in African Traditional Thought,” pp. 171–172, Menkiti formulates a broad contrast between African and Western conceptions of the person. For us, this is the author’s position, open to examination and criticism. Its presence in a primary text does not oblige an editor to repeat it as an established description of all cultures.

Three scales should be distinguished. First, particular understandings expressed in a specific language. Second, a philosophical reconstruction of them. Third, a general model an author proposes for comparison. Moving between these scales requires grounds and connecting arguments. An expression’s use in one community does not immediately establish rules for all Africa.

Our contemporary example: a reader encounters an attractive formula about mutual humanity and transfers it to every dispute about individual rights. Even if the formula is appropriate, it does not answer who belongs within “we,” who may refuse, or what happens to someone the collective rejects. Those questions need additional arguments.

For the same reason, Ubuntu will not serve here as the name for all African thought. It is a significant line in its own right, but cannot automatically be identified with Akan concepts, Menkiti’s position, or every communal practice. Refusing this merger does not prevent comparison. It makes comparison more honest: first establish who speaks, about what, and on which grounds, then investigate possible similarities.

2. Menkiti: becoming a person in community

For Menkiti, becoming a person involves entering communal life, learning rules, and fulfilling duties. On pp. 171–173 of his article, personhood is presented as an acquired achievement rather than simply a consequence of birth. He uses Mbiti’s formulation about the dependence of “I” on “we” to support this move. We encounter Mbiti through this text; we do not claim full reading of his own book.

Try assessing the approach’s appeal through our hypothetical example. Two adults are equally capable of reasoning about goodness. One cares for people close to them; the other constantly uses their help without acknowledging obligations. Moral language allows us to distinguish their behaviour. Personhood then concerns more than the capacity to think: how someone lives among others matters.

This framing maintains a demanding approach to actions. We stop treating available capacities as accomplished virtues. Knowing what reliability means and acting reliably are different. But this demand becomes dangerous if quietly transferred from judging behaviour to a person’s right to protection.

We can condemn an action while recognising its agent's dignity. We can judge someone insufficiently responsible without making their existence less significant. If these levels merge, moral judgement begins to determine who receives basic rights.

Here lies a central line of our critical examination. Acquiring virtues does require relationships and practice. It does not yet follow that someone who has not achieved an ideal can be excluded from moral attention. The following sections do not attribute ready answers to every contemporary case to Menkiti; they show questions raised by a strong version of communal becoming.

3. A human being and a moral ideal of personhood

Age and gradual entry into social life have an important place in Menkiti's argument. He even refers to English pronoun usage when speaking about a child. The passage read, pp. 172–173. This argument should be assessed separately from the general thesis of development. One language's grammar does not itself prove a child's moral standing in another society. A connection between a form of expression and the structure of recognition requires an argument, and sometimes additional historical and linguistic evidence.

Continue with our own critical examination. Someone can acquire skills of responsibility, understand consequences better, and earn trust. It does not follow that they have no right to care before reaching that level. "Can answer for an action," "is considered a reliable participant," and "has significance" designate different relations. If a theory uses one word for all three, it must explain the transitions rather than sustain them through a shared name alone.

The distinction appears in a thought experiment involving two adults. One has long helped neighbours and earned trust. The other has just arrived and lacks a shared history. There may be grounds for entrusting the first with distributing a common resource if their experience suits the task. But the second's lack of that history provides no grounds for ignoring their need for safety or discounting any objection in advance. An earned role and the initial treatment of a person can differ without cancelling each other.

An opposite counterexample is also possible. If a formerly respected participant starts abusing trust, their previous standing must not prevent examination. Otherwise, achieved personhood becomes lifelong infallibility. Social recognition is more convincing when it permits reconsideration of a particular role without excluding the person from moral treatment. This is our proposed distinction, not a resolution already reached in the Menkiti–Gyekye debate.

"Personhood" has no single unproblematic Russian equivalent. The Russian word *lichnost* may mean individuality, a bearer of rights, moral maturity, or social recognition. Translation can hide the distinctions before an argument begins.

In “African Ethics,” §4, Gyekye examines Akan and Yoruba expressions in which the negative judgement “not a person” concerns moral behaviour without denying membership of humankind. This analysis shows a distinction between a human being and a normative ideal of personhood. It does not authorise literally depriving anyone of humanity.

For our contemporary explanation, compare “he committed a cruel act” with “he is not human.” The first identifies the object of judgement relatively clearly. The second may be a moral metaphor but can also become a language of exclusion. Even when the speaker means only a lack of virtue, the recipient may hear a denial of dignity.

It therefore helps to ask which conclusion follows. If the issue is answering for an action, the subject is conduct and responsibility. If someone asserts that a person no longer deserves safety or fair treatment, that is another proposition. It requires separate justification and carries a different cost.

A moral ideal can remain meaningful without that final transition. We can discuss care, honesty, participation, and reliability without making them an entrance examination for the right to be human. This is our ethical position for the reading, not an attempt to declare the dispute resolved within every philosophy considered.

The distinction matters especially for children and people who struggle to fulfil ordinary duties. A lack of independent action does not imply a lack of significance. When “personhood” carries several meanings at once, it helps to name the intended one directly before deriving rules of treatment from it.

4. Gyekye: sociality and autonomy

Gyekye defends “moderate communitarianism.” The available abstract of “Person and Community,” pp. 35–76, identifies the task of relating community, rights, and duties. The full chapter is unavailable here. Richard Ansah and Modestha Mensah explain and critically examine the position in greater detail: in Gyekye, individuality is only partly formed by community, and acknowledging autonomy is connected with acknowledging rights. See pp. 67–72 of their article.

In our hypothetical family scene, this turn lets us recognise relatives’ contribution without equating gratitude with handing them all authority over the future. A person did not create the language in which they justify a choice or raise themselves unaided. Yet they are the one able to voice an argument about their life.

Autonomy here need not mean independence from every relationship. Someone can accept obligations, receive support, and change a decision after talking. The question is whether room for their own judgement remains and disagreement receives respect.

Imagine a counterexample: relatives paid for education under a clearly agreed prior condition of temporary help in the family business. Appealing to freedom does not erase the agreement. Its content, voluntariness, and changed circumstances must be established. Moderation does not mean every individual wish automatically wins.

The opposite case also occurs: conditions are announced only after education ends. “We always assumed this” is not the same as consent received. Someone can acknowledge help without recognising a new obligation in the proposed form.

These cases show why the social origins of personhood must be distinguished from a particular collective’s authority. The first may profoundly ground identity. The second must be discussed with regard to a particular action. Otherwise, every reminder of dependence becomes an indefinite warrant to direct someone’s life.

5. How moderate is the moderate answer?

A moderate name does not guarantee a way to resolve conflict. Ansah and Mensah argue that Gyekye may retain community’s priority in decisive cases, leaving insufficient distinction from a radical version. Their criticism is a position within the debate, not a final verdict on the whole model. See their 2018 article, discussion of limits on rights.

For independent examination, it helps to imagine a situation in which individual good and a collective demand genuinely diverge. Almost any theory looks harmonious while they coincide. Difficulty emerges where the limits of permissible restriction must be established.

In our hypothetical example, a small organisation requires everyone to work additional evenings. Some employees agree because the project matters. One cannot: they care for someone close to them. If the common good means finishing the project at any cost, refusal is called selfishness. If everyone’s circumstances count, the task becomes harder: scope, deadlines, or distribution of work must change.

Which questions distinguish a respectful collective argument from convenient pressure? Who bears the burden? Who receives the result? Was the obligation agreed? Is there a less onerous way? Can the affected person participate in reconsideration? These are our questions about a contemporary case, not Gyekye’s ready-made historical formula.

A real test of moderation requires more than asserting both sides’ value; it must show what happens to someone who disagrees. If rights are recognised only while someone agrees, recognition differs little from permission to behave well. If every restriction is ruled out regardless of consequences for others, collective responsibility loses its subject.

The debate remains substantive precisely between these extremes. The pleasant word “balance” does not resolve it. It needs grounds, particular boundaries, and the possibility of criticising those who speak for the common good.

6. Community: who, exactly?

A philosophical argument becomes indefinite when “community” acts as a single agent. In an actual contemporary situation, a collective consists of people with different capacities, interests, and forms of participation. This is our analytical question about applying communal models.

Who says “we” in the hypothetical family? Everyone, an elder relative, those who funded the education, or one particularly influential person? The difference matters. A proposal supported by a majority does not automatically express everyone’s interest either.

Shared dependence, a common resource, and a right to representation should be distinguished. Someone may depend on language and culture, receive family help, and not authorise a particular relative to speak for them. Merge these levels, and any disagreement becomes ingratitude toward the whole community.

Consider a hypothetical member of several communities. They belong to a family, a professional association, a neighbourhood, and a religious group. These groups’ demands sometimes conflict. “A person exists in community” does not choose which obligation comes first. Additional criteria are needed.

Different groups may also understand a good life differently. Internal dispute does not necessarily make a collective less real. Sometimes the ability to disagree is part of its stability. If only unanimity is allowed, the descriptive word “belonging” begins working as a demand for loyalty.

In our reading, it helps to make community more concrete rather than abandon the concept. Which relationships exist here? Who receives support? Who lacks a voice? Which rules can be reconsidered? This permits assessment of shared life’s strengths without romantically assuming that a collective is automatically caring, just, and internally homogeneous.

7. Disagreement can also be participation

If personhood develops in relationships, disagreement need not destroy them. Someone may criticise a rule because shared life matters to them and they want it organised better. We develop this argument ourselves without declaring it a consensus among the authors discussed.

Imagine a hypothetical mutual-aid council. A group collects funds and distributes them to people in need. One member notices that access mainly goes to those close to its leader and proposes transparent criteria. The reply is, “You put yourself above everyone.” Yet requesting an intelligible rule may protect mutual aid itself.

Disagreement with a decision must be distinguished from rejecting every obligation. A critic may keep participating, accept their share of the burden, and offer grounds that can be checked. An objection’s existence does not establish its motives. Accusations of selfishness sometimes avoid addressing its content.

Disagreement does not automatically become right, however. Someone may use the language of justice for personal advantage, evade responsibility, or underestimate resource limits. Respecting a voice does not cancel examination of its arguments. It means the objection’s origins do not suffice to dismiss it.

The question of exit matters especially. If membership is voluntary, what happens when someone leaves? Do earlier agreed obligations remain? Can new ones end? What does voluntariness mean when someone depends economically on the group? A universal answer would smooth over distinct cases too quickly.

These questions do not reduce community to a contract among fully independent individuals. They show that social connection alone does not determine all moral authority. The deeper the dependence, the more significant clear boundaries become, particularly for those who struggle to object or find other support.

8. Caring for those who cannot “earn” recognition

Another test concerns obligations over time. Someone may receive support long before they can reciprocate. If help means exchanging equivalent contributions, a question arises about those whose ability to respond is unknown. If community includes care for them, its foundation exceeds immediate reciprocity. Contributions do not thereby become irrelevant; the logic through which they are compared changes.

In our thought experiment, several neighbours support someone after a severe bereavement. One expects the recipient later to undertake organisational work. Another considers the help sufficient in itself. A third worries about overburdening those who help. The disagreement is not simply between caring and selfish people. Grounds for help, expectations of the future, and the distribution of its cost differ. They can be discussed while preserving the recipient’s significance and helpers’ possible limitations.

The language of collective duty therefore needs to distinguish capacity, an agreed promise, and a general willingness to support. Someone may be capable of acting without having

promised. They may promise and temporarily lose the capacity. They may support others differently from what a familiar rule expects. Measuring every case by one visible contribution risks making community overlook some of its own relationships.

This also resists a romantic contrast between a wholly independent individual and a wholly caring collective. Autonomy may need support; support may need the recipient's freedom to object. The hardest question begins once both propositions are accepted: which conditions make dependence compatible with a voice of one's own? No general name for a philosophical school removes the need to answer in a particular situation.

One of the strongest tests of a normative model of personhood is its treatment of someone unable to fulfil expected duties. Our discussion is an independent ethical examination, not a reconstruction of one African answer concerning disability, age, or illness.

Imagine an adult temporarily unable to work or help relatives. If value is measured solely by contribution, their position worsens twice: first through lost capacities, then through lost recognition. Communal care can follow another logic: a person remains significant even when unable to return the same help.

Reciprocity and immediate exchange are not identical. A group may distribute help across generations and periods of life without expecting exact repayment from each recipient. Relationships can thus protect people whom a model of self-sufficiency easily overlooks.

Yet care can also involve control. A helper may demand that the recipient relinquish the right to choose. We therefore need to see dependence and retained autonomy together. Inability to perform one action does not prove inability to make every decision.

A hypothetical example: someone needs mobility assistance but decides for themselves whom to see and what to do. Caring for them does not automatically mean choosing their social life. Help sometimes expands possibilities; sometimes possibilities narrow under its name.

Philosophies of communal becoming are especially interesting when they allow this duality to be discussed. They remind us that support is real while requiring criticism of its distribution. If moral maturity is an ideal, it can be directed above all toward treatment of vulnerable people, rather than making vulnerability evidence of deficient personhood. This proposal in our reading remains open to further argument.

9. What this means in practice

For everyday reflection, four questions should be separated: to whom do I owe the support I received; which obligations did I actually accept; what can I currently do; and which boundary of decision do I want to preserve? The answers may connect, but none replaces the others.

Return to the education scene. Someone can acknowledge relatives' help, discuss affordable support for the family, and still reject their choice of a job for them. Another possibility remains: they voluntarily decide to stay. Neither leaving nor remaining measures developed personhood in itself.

If the distinction suits your situation, start by naming particular help without a broad moral label. Who did what? Then clarify whether a condition was agreed beforehand. Afterward, consider expectations that arose later. This sequence does not guarantee agreement, but makes it less likely that the dispute immediately encompasses all gratitude, all culture, and an entire life.

It also helps to notice whose voice is missing. Perhaps care for an older relative is discussed without asking them. Perhaps decisions about shared work are made by people who will not bear its main burden. Restoring a voice sometimes changes the question's content as well as its tone.

Avoid using the reading to label relatives "radical communitarians" and yourself philosophically mature. That would turn a complex debate into another set of labels. A more precise application is modest: name the relationship, obligation, disagreement, and limit of what is known. Philosophy helps distinguish rather than distribute certificates of humanity among people in a conversation.

10. Belonging without disappearing

Several answers about personhood allow us to retain a tension too easily dismissed by slogans. Menkiti makes us take communal becoming seriously. Gyekye asks about autonomy and rights within sociality. Critics of moderate communitarianism examine whether that recognition remains effective in real conflict. The dispute is not a defect in philosophy; it shows philosophy at work.

For our conclusion as readers, the ability to say two sentences together matters. "I did not form myself alone." And: "It does not follow that any collective may decide for me." Between them lies no emptiness, but a domain of obligations, gratitude, assistance, and contested rules.

Belonging can offer language, memory, and support. It can also demand silence. Autonomy can protect dignity. It can also conceal a refusal to notice dependence on others. Names alone do not release us from examining particular actions.

"What makes a human being a person?" should therefore be accompanied by "what happens to those who do not meet the proposed ideal?" Here a philosophical definition's consequences become visible. It can direct attention toward care and responsibility, or justify exclusion.

Our hypothetical family scene still has no final answer. Yet the conversation can proceed more precisely: about help, agreement, the future, and the right to object. The young person need not deny relatives in order to differ from them. Relatives need not abandon their expectations in order to recognise that voice. Whether they reach agreement is decided in their lives. Philosophy merely makes several answers visible, along with the cost of moving from each answer to how a person is treated.

Sources used

1. Ifeanyi A. Menkiti. Person and Community in African Traditional Thought, in *African Philosophy: An Introduction*, 1984, pp. 171–181; a teaching excerpt of pp. 171–176 is available; pp. 171–173 were read. Foundation for becoming a person and community's role; Mbiti's formulation is conveyed only through this work.

2. Kwame Gyekye. African Ethics, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, §4. Moral personhood in the Akan and Yoruba expressions considered.

3. Kwame Gyekye. Person and Community: In Defense of Moderate Communitarianism, *Tradition and Modernity*, 1997, pp. 35–76. Only the publisher's abstract was read; the following critical article supplies the detailed account.

4. Richard Ansah, Modestha Mensah. Gyekye's Moderate Communitarianism: A Case of Radical Communitarianism in Disguise, UJAH 19(2), 2018, pp. 62–87. Account of Gyekye's position and the objection concerning community's practical priority.