

# An Africentric theory of human personhood

## Abstract

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## An Africentric theory of human personhood

My major objective in this article is to work out an Africentric theory of human personhood. Specifically, I aim to attempt an African psychological rendering of that fundamental indigenous African assumption, made popular by the Nguni proverb, that “umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu” (often translated as “a person is a person through other persons”). To achieve this aim an African psychological theory of human personhood is offered to demonstrate that, in Africa as in other parts of the world, mature human beings are not born but made. In grounding the theory within an Africentric paradigm, the following themes

## Augustine Nwoye

School of Applied Human Sciences  
Discipline of Psychology  
University of KwaZulu-Natal  
Pietermaritzburg  
[nwoye@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:nwoye@ukzn.ac.za)

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that reflect an African origin of the theory will be discussed: the basic postulates of an African worldview; an Africentric theory of human motivation; and influential agents, moral visions, and social processes in the formation of an African personhood. Drawing insight from the contribution by Lerone Bennett, Jr, I use the term “Africentric” rather than the more popular term “Afrocentric” to qualify the theory of human personhood being put forward in this article. I took this decision guided by the spirit of the following citation credited to Bennett (1967: 46), who highlighted that “At the Racism in Education Conference of the American Federation of Teachers, the delegates unanimously endorsed a resolution which called on all educators, persons, and organizations to abandon the ‘slavery-imposed name’ ‘Negro’ for the terms ‘African American’ or ‘Afro-American.’”

Continuing, Bennett (1967: 46) noted that “... in terms of mass impact, the **New York Amsterdam News**, one of the largest black newspapers, announced that it would no longer use the word ‘Negro’. The newspaper, which now identifies Americans of African descent as Afro-Americans, reports a favorable response to the change”. (emphases added).

Given this old association of the root term, “Afro”, in making reference to the “identifiable Americans of African descent”, I prefer, in the context of this article, to use the term Africentric, for making reference to the psycho-cultural frame of reference of the continental African peoples from whom the ancestors of the African Americans took their origination. In taking this option, I do so with the conviction that the term “Africentric” is indeed the more appropriate nomenclature than the term afrocentric when the aim, as in this article, is to highlight the distinctive contributions of African culture and tradition in the making of human personhood. Accordingly, the term Africentrism will be used in this discussion in contradistinction to the term Eurocentrism that takes centre stage when attention is directed to any discussion about the psycho-cultural perspective of the people of European descent.

Having made this clarification, I wish to argue that one central perspective that serves to anchor the present discussion is the urge for a paradigm shift (from Eurocentrism to Africentrism) in the conduct of an African-based scholarship on human personhood. In line with Linda Myers (1985), why this shift appears sorely needed arises from the legitimate assumption held by many Africanists (Asante, 1987, 1998; Nobles, 1990; Karenga, 1993; Goggins, 1996) that any serious study of Africans and their worlds and cultures, must be undertaken from the frame of reference or the worldview of the Africans themselves. The fundamental argument here being that in Africentric, unlike in Eurocentric, perspective, reality is seen in holistic (both-and) rather than in dualistic (either-or) terms (Asante, 1987, 1998; Nobles, 1990; Karenga, 1993; Myers, 1993; Goggins, 1996; Nwoye, 2015). Given this understanding, the Africentric theory of human personhood to be developed in this paper must, therefore, be grounded on a rounded

explication of the basic tenets of the African worldview that symbolizes that *both-and* perspective in African metaphysical system which recognizes not only the physical but also the “spiritual side of ‘Africanness’” (Gerhart, 1978: 201). It is similarly argued that other main constituents of such a theory should include a discussion of the notion of human motivation in Africentric perspective as well as the moral visions, mechanisms and agents of human socialization processes that promote the formation of African human personhood.

Against the above, the principal motivation of this paper is that, although some Eurocentric theories of the human personality or personhood (these terms are to be used interchangeably in this discussion) already exist, including those developed by some African American psychologists (e.g., Kambon, 1992; Myers, 1993; and Kambon & Bowen-Reid, 2010), some of which are very relevant to our experience, a continental African version of the theory of African human personhood is still needed. The aim of such a continental African-derived theory of human personhood is to specify the psycho-cultural implication of the fundamental African assumption made popular by the Nguni proverb that “*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*” (often translated as “a person is a person through other persons” or, as rendered in its Igbo, Nigerian language equivalence, that: “*obu madu n’eme madu obulu madu*”). Through the explication of such a theory, the specific import of these incisive African psychological proverbial expressions can emerge.

Indeed, it is my conviction that engaging in the critical task of re-visioning how an African person becomes a person through other persons in the African context is a cause worthy of attention if we are to offer an Africentric alternative to the currently pervasive Eurocentric hegemony in the personality field that gives little room for the accommodation of other accounts of how human subjectivities are crafted (Haslam, 2007; Mischel, Shoda, & Ayduk, 2007; Hogan & Smither, 2008; John, Robins, & Pervin, 2008; Ryckman, 2008; Cervone & Pervin, 2009; Feist & Feist, 2009; Larsen & Buss, 2009; Schultz & Schultz, 2009; Ewen, 2009; Cooper, 2010; Crowne, 2010; Funder, 2010; Olson & Hergenbahn, 2010; Miserando, 2011; Friedman & Schustack, 2011).

## **The problem**

Indeed, on account of the colonial origins and imported contents of the curriculum of higher education in almost all countries in postcolonial Africa (Nwoye, 2015, 2017), young Africans have become conditioned to perceive the world, including the world of scholarship through the eyes of Euro-American culture and the Eurocentric framework of scholarship. And the argument of this paper is that such state of affairs needs to be resisted as it leads young Africans to unconsciously learn to see themselves in foreign norms and images, and our specific African experiences as insignificant elements for

academic scholarship. In addition, the basic limitation of the extant Eurocentric theories of personality (Cloninger, 2008; Hogan & Smither, 2008; John, Robins, & Pervin, 2008; Ryckman, 2008; Feist & Feist, 2009; Schultz & Schultz, 2009; Crowne, 2010; Olson & Hergenbahn, 2010; and Friedman & Schustack, 2011) found in most reading lists for university psychology students in Africa lies in the inability of their respective authors to recognize and admit that any attempt at working out a generic theory of human personality or personhood that is meant to be applicable in equal amount and tension to each person everywhere in the world, in all shapes, colours and details, and free of the stamp of local cultural influences, must be viewed with suspicion (Schneider, 2010). This is because the moral visions which each culture places at the disposal of each member of the community in this process tend to differ from culture to culture (Christopher et al, 2014). On the other hand, what is uniform across all cultures is that the process of transition from culture to vision and to personhood, is made possible largely through the dialogical character of human beings. For it is essentially through the process of dialogue that the moral visions of a culture, transmitted by its social teachers; through stories, proverbs, and myths, that go into the making of the person, becomes realizable.

## **Methodology**

In an attempt to open up and contribute to this debate and, in that way, to help to facilitate the emergence of a more democratic and pluralistic attitude in the formulation of theories of human personhood, effort will be made, in the context of this discussion to explore, through the systematic review of the literature, the following fundamental themes: (a) the nature of the African worldview that usually serves as an anchor to achieving a proper understanding of any Africentric approach to the making of a person; (b) the notion of the sources and the dynamics of human motivation as seen from the Africentric paradigm; (c) the moral visions, and the contents of African approaches to the crafting of human personhood; and (d) the human agents of human socialization processes in the African context.

In pursuing these themes, the chief goal of the paper will be essentially twofold. The first is to serve as a means of enabling the African student of psychology, whether operating in continental Africa or in the Diaspora, to avoid being trapped into a state of unquestionable acceptance of the Eurocentric perspective of personality (wa Thiong'o, 1993). In this regard, it is envisaged that from the insight to be drawn from this discussion these students should be able to learn, for example, that apart from Abraham Maslow's theory of human motivation championed in the Eurocentric perspective, an African theory of human motivation can also be formulated in line with the Africentric perspective. The second is to highlight and illuminate the range and depth of social determinations of the African human being, such as concerns each child's relationship to his or her people's indigenous social systems and values, philosophies and worldview,

and therefore each child's modes of insertion within the total culture of the traditional as well as the modern African world.

At the same time the present paper is not designed to harp on the notion of African exceptionalism, as, for instance, highlighted in LeVine's (1973) article, *Patterns of personality in Africa*, or on the notion of what used to be referred to as the "African Personality", as articulated by Blyden in the late nineteenth century, and thereafter adopted and propagated by Leopold Sedar Senghor, the former president of the Federal Republic of Senegal. The central goal of the discussion is rather to show how African personhood is socio-culturally derived (Mkhize, 2004; Schneider, 2006; 2010; Freeman, 2010) and to point at the variety of enduring forces, both ancient and modern, determining its distinctive form. Furthermore, in working out an African theory of human personhood in this paper, my orienting vision and direction is not at all grounded on the spirit of "indigenism", or that is to say, on the attempt to glorify the African past. The central motivation rather is to incorporate the *spirit of complementarity* (Ngwaba, 1996) or the need to offer an African theory of human personhood that should serve as an alternative and complementary viewpoint to theories on the same theme emanating from the West. This means that the governing spirit of the paper arises from the pervasive need to close the gap between the Western and the African accounts regarding the forces that contribute to the making of the person in the African context.

In practical terms, then, the most important reason for undertaking a study of this nature is to trace the main lines of influence implicated in the African way of converting a human baby from the raw materials of heredity to a full-fledged/mature adult human being in-relation-with-others (Mkhize, 2004; Nwoye, 2006; Freeman, 2010; Schneider, 2010). To start such an account, one must begin by exposing and explicating the concept and content of the African worldview that gives anchor to achieving a basic understanding of the African's way of orienting himself or herself in the world. And so to highlighting the key tenets and assumptions of the African worldview we now turn.

## **1. Basic tenets and assumptions of the African worldview**

The term "African worldview" is used in this paper to refer to the African's perception of his/her world (Kalu, 1978). Such an Africentric cosmovision is said to entail a religious (both-and) view of the universe. This means, in broad terms, that the average African sees his /her world as being made up of two interdependent, interpenetrating and complementary planes: the visible and the invisible or the material and the spiritual planes (Nwoye, 2013, 2014, 2015a). Influenced by their belief that the universe is made up of both visible and invisible forces and agencies, which, though separated, are in close proximity to one another, most African scholars agree that the average African man or woman holds a *precarious* view of the universe (Kalu, 1978). This implies the

view that most African peoples many a time act from the understanding and assumption that various types of misfortune, illness, death, and failure arise from the activities of unseen forces, unknown and unseen infuriated spiritual agencies, and revengeful ancestors. Indeed, in the African understanding there are four possible sources of human disturbance: biological, psychological, social and spiritual (Nwoye, 2015b).

Having highlighted the broad canvas lens of the African worldview, the time is now ripe to further specify the assumptions, teachings, and beliefs which contribute to the making of a typical African man or woman, found embedded in the African world view.

The *first* assumption is that, in the African worldview, the earth, the visible physical world, in which we walk on and live in, is the homeland of created things, while the invisible, spiritual world, is the abode of the spirits, including the divinities, ancestral and ghost spirits, clan deities and other unknown invisible evil forces. In line with this assumption, Morrison (1984: 342) remarked that “the black reality involves supernatural and a profound rootedness in the real world at the same time with neither taking precedence over the other”.

The *second* assumption of the typical African man or woman, arising from his or her African worldview, is that there is a two-way traffic between the above-mentioned two worlds, namely, between the visible and the invisible worlds that make up the universe. In this context, a typical African man or woman believes that the people of the earth can only access the spirit-world through death or through *facilitated perception*, such as through divination or dreaming (Peek, 2009), as well as through ritual practices. On the other hand, the converse belief within the Africentric paradigm is that the inhabitants or agents of the spiritual plane (including major and lesser divinities, ghost spirits, ancestral spirits and evil spirits) have very easy access to the human world, often through indirect or symbolic or hidden communication (Nwoye, 2015a). The ancestors, for this reason, are frequently believed to communicate their wishes and annoyances indirectly, such as through dreams or by bringing misfortune and ill health on the living (Nwoye, 2015b). They – the ancestors, understood in the whole of Africa as members of the *living dead* (Mbiti 1969) – are believed, too, to be present as invisible guests at family meetings and festivals, following such family proceedings with great interest like everyone else (Achebe, 1958). Given this understanding, many people in Africa are motivated to behave themselves in accordance with the mores of the family or the community to avoid infuriating the ancestors.

The *third* assumption of the African worldview is that there are both good and evil spirits as well as good and evil human beings (Magesa, 1998) that populate the planet. This, in one sense, means that according to the African worldview, we, human beings, live in the

midst of invisible forces, to which we are mystically linked, which when infuriated can visit us with anger and adversity, but when appeased and well served and disposed can bring us good fortune and blessings (Nwoye, 2006; 2015a, b). This belief again means that some of the things that we do or some of the things that happen to us are often not brought about by our own agency or by our own fault. They are often believed to be misfortunes arising from the action of offended ancestors or the spirits of the land that has been desecrated, requiring expiation or cleansing (Mbiti, 1969; Magesa, 1998; Nwoye, 2006, 2015b).

The *fourth* assumption of the African worldview which influences the making of an African humanity is related to the one just mentioned, namely that there exists the phenomenon of mystical causality in the universe (Nwoye, 2006; 2015b). Influenced by this belief, many African peoples tend to see the basis for people's failure or success in this world as attributable to the actions and motives of hidden spiritual agencies (Horton, 1995). Thus, following the law of mystical causality (Mbiti, 1969; Magesa, 1998; Nwoye, 2006), a typical African individual believes that evil human beings can transform into dangerous animals like snakes, scorpions, or lions to kill their targeted human enemies (Mbiti, 1969; Nwoye, 2006). And it is equally believed that some extraordinary humans working in concert with evil forces can mystically change into wild pigs to enter and destroy their enemies' crops or farm (Nwoye, 2006; 2013). To protect themselves against the attack of such hidden, mystical forces, traditional Africans, and in some cases even contemporary citizens, such as some educated African politicians and civil servants, enter into pacts or covenants with spiritual beings or forces, to gain promotion in their work-place or, in the case of the politicians, to excel in national elections and to return the favour through ritual giving of gifts to the forces concerned (Nwoye, M A C, 2011).

*Fifth*, another important aspect of the African worldview is one related to the emphasis given to the following as the basic moral virtues valorised in a well-bred African child: patience, perseverance, due discretion, ability to live for others or the spirit of *Ubuntu*, obedience to parents and respect to elders, and modesty and industriousness (Mbiti, 1969; Nsamenang, 1992, 1998; Magesa, 1998; Mkhize, 2004; Nwoye, 2004; 2006; Freeman, 2014). The African person's worldview therefore affects the moral aspect of his or her personhood. And this is, among other things, the area in which Charles Taylor's (1989, 1992) theory of the *significance of interiority* and *the search for the good in the making of the self* finds support and corroborates the importance given to internalization of basic moral and human values in a well-bred African person.

The *sixth* assumption is the African's belief in the genetic foundation of his or her personhood. In this way, members of any typical community expect a child to resemble either their father or mother or one of their ancestors or parents' relatives (Nwoye,

2006). Where this is not the case, there is suspicion that could generate enormous rancour among the parents of the child suspected of coming from an illegitimate ancestry. This belief goes hand in hand with the traditional emphasis in Africa on extended family consciousness, which emphasizes the philosophy of interdependence and solidarity among human beings; an attitude that is manifested in the *ubuntu* orientation to living. In this context, the *ubuntu* philosophy, the central pivot of this discussion, as has already been noted entails the idea that *humans are made persons by other persons* (Mkhize, 2004). Based on this understanding, the African worldview is said to reject the Western individualistic picture of human beings that emphasizes the idea of humans as self-contained units, in total control and in-charge of their own destiny in the world (Taylor, 1989; Cushman, 1990; Freeman, 1993, 2014; Mkhize, 2004; Nwoye, 2006).

*Seventh*, in the African worldview, finally, an individual's life project is understood as essentially multi-dimensional and holistic in range, with the aim to achieve maximum success in various departments of their earthly existence: life, health, wealth, offspring and peace/joy (Ekwunife, 1998; Nwoye, 2006). For this reason, the African person's paradise is said to start here on earth, its effects following the person after death into the world of the ancestors facilitated by well performed funeral rites (Ejizu, 1987; Horton, 1995; Nwoye, M A C, 2005).

These assumptions and perceptions that constitute the African worldview serve as sources of moral visions for the African person (Christopher, Wendt, Marecek & Goodman, 2014). And they give anchor to the socio-cultural-spiritualist formation of human personhood in the continental African context (Ejizu, 1987; Nwoye, 2006). Indeed, an African is African not by the criterion of the colour of his or her skin, but by the extent to which s/he is largely governed by or has internalized, through the influence of upbringing and culture, the above mentioned key assumptions of the African worldview, all of which emphasize the influence and importance of spirituality in the mental constitution and health of an adult human being (Myers, 1985; Nobles, 1997). This is another way of saying that in the Africentric view of the influencing factors in the making of human personhood, the phenomenon of internalization of the African worldview provides the principal foundation of its basic landscape. This is because the seven dimensions of the African worldview described above infiltrate the space of selfhood (Freeman, 2010) of the typical human African person.

## **2. Sources of human motivation**

Within the Africentric perspective, there are basically five major sources of motivation in human beings. These are: (a) the need to protect against shame, (b) the urge to overcome the limitations of one's birth or background, (c) the urge to compete favourably with

one's age mates in achieving some *distinctions of worth* valorized in the community of which they are a part, (d) the urge to avoid angering the ancestors; and (e) the desire for membership in the human community and to avoid ostracization; including the need to achieve this aim through investment in social support. The motivational power of each of these five elements or factors is highlighted below, but even before doing this, it needs to be mentioned that the above list demonstrates that the motivational spring of the African human being is not, as emphasized in Maslow's Eurocentric theory of motivation, solely individuo-centred, but also other-referenced, being grounded on "the poetics of the Other" (Freeman, 2014: 222).

*(a) The urge to protect against shame*

Here the important motivating factor is the urge for the promotion of "face protection" and the need to avoid engaging in behaviours that will either dent or tarnish one's own social image or good name, or those of one's family and clan. This is a theme similar to Erving Goffman's notion of the human need for impression management (Goffman, 1959). Magesa (1998: 158), commenting in this regard, remarked that in the African context we can distinguish between two kinds of shame: "shame of the face" and "shame of the heart or soul." In his view, "to come into unavoidable physical contact with one's mother in-law may be shame of the skin or of the face, but to commit incest is deep shame or shame of the heart that calls for confession and retribution" (ibid). In this way, according to Magesa (1998), in some ethnic groups in Africa, if a person is to become whole again after an incestuous infraction, the shame needs to be removed by specific rites. This typically takes the form of a cleansing ritual, intended to reverse the individual's state of impurity arising from the offence committed, in the eyes of the community and the ancestors.

Influenced by their inner urge to protect against shame, the past as well as the modern African person strives to control his or her passions, both sexual and emotional. This explains why incest or child sexual abuse incidents that might occur in an African family rarely get reported outside or are complained against openly in many African homes, although we are beginning to see some changing patterns in South Africa in this regard. The reason for the common attempt to prevent such incidences from reaching the media or the police is because to do so will soil one's father's or cousin's (or the abuser's) name and the name and face and the future welfare and potential for marriage of the abused girl child in the community.

The same urge to protect against shame or social disgrace is the reason why people in the past and to a good extent even today, live a life of considerable restraint, avoiding involvement in socially prohibited activities such as stealing, being caricatured as lazy or a loafer or "putting a girl in the family way" (that is, impregnating a girl out

of wedlock). Some (teenage girls) who get impregnated before marriage try by all means possible to abort the child to avoid the shame that go with it. In some cases, this leads to premature death, particularly when they choose the option of abortion at the hands of the quack doctors. All these are socially discouraged infractions. And people avoid engaging in them to avoid losing their face in the community or to avoid the shame or the social disgrace and negative sanctions that go with them. This orientation shows that the making of an African person includes a concern with the state of one's standing in one's community and the quality of the relationship between the individual and the members of the spiritual world recognized therein (Kane, 1969, 1972; Irele 1980). The formation of persons in the African context thus implies, as Taylor (1989) has proposed, an option for the good or a desire for maintenance of a good face in one's community.

*(b) The urge to overcome the limitations of one's birth or background and to achieve some distinctions of worth valorized in the community*

Now, apart from the urge to protect against shame, the next motivational wellspring in the African context that promotes the emergence of the fully realized person (Nwoye, 2006) is the urge to overcome the circumstances or limitations of one's birth or background. In some individuals, like Okonkwo in Achebe's **Things fall apart** (1958), this urge can be very strong and compelling, acting as the prime centre of inspiration and initiative in people's daily struggles and efforts. In that case, the African perspective is consistent with that of Alfred Adler, on the operation of *the spirit of the great upward surge* in human beings. Influenced by such a psychological incentive, children of poor or humble parentage have this aspect as their greatest source of motivation or the great upward drive, in search of opportunities to re-grade and to re-author themselves or to better their chances or destinies in life (Nwoye, 2006). They try in every way possible, through dint of hard work and self-discipline, to turn around or cancel out their deficit socio-economic background, leading them into a more promising life alternative. Hence, as emphasized by one protagonist in Achebe's (1958) classic novel, earlier cited, among the Igbo (and, more generally, African peoples), "a man's (*sic*) achievement is dependent on the strength of his arm", and not on the wealth or the achievements of his parents or on the type of family s/he comes from. The operative influence of this basic urge forces an individual to not merely ride on the glory of his or her parents' achievement, but to strive to make and build up his or her own worth in life. In this way, children of the African poor succeed in transcending or outgrowing the limitations of their humble background or the humble beginnings they had inherited. The reverse motivation is, of course, the crisis that is faced by some wealthy African families where children fail to make a mark in life because the governing sentiment in them (the children) is that there is no need for such effort given that the parents have already achieved all the wealth that is needed to make life worth living for generations of children yet to come!

*(c) The urge to compete favourably with one's age-mates*

The third source of motivation within the Africentric paradigm is the urge to compete favourably, at all times, in the major departments of life, with one's age mates and other contemporaries. This point refers essentially to the often unvoiced fundamental wish, in a typical African individual, not to be seen to be left behind in the general hunt for *distinctions of worth* in one's community (Taylor, 1989; Nwoye, 2006). This urge promotes the spirit of industry (Erikson, 1950) in the average African individual. And this sentiment is facilitated by the culture of age-grouping and the initiation ceremonies through which each age set announces its visibility and recognition in society. Once an African child recognizes himself or herself as a member of an age group, s/he tends to thread his/her way carefully in the various competitions of life by means of *side-shadowing* processes—that is to say, with an eye on what his/her mates are doing and how favourably or not, s/he stands in comparison with them (Nwoye, 2006). In African communities, people feel frustrated and therefore unhappy with themselves and their personal “destinies” in life, when they discover that they are not able to accomplish most of the life tasks at the same season when their age-mates are fully involved in accomplishing such developmental tasks (see Sorokin & Merton, 1937, on “social time”). In this way, people value getting married when their age-mates start to get married. Similarly, they value being employed in gainful pursuits when their age-mates are doing so. Even the urge to build their personal homes, or these days, to own a personal car when their age-mates are doing this, is part of this trend. But the negative side of this dynamic is that it creates opportunity for development of chronic envy when some of them discover that the success of their mates cannot be matched and has therefore become a reproach to their own failing destiny and effort.

*(d) The urge to avoid angering the Ancestors*

The fourth motivational spring within the Africentric paradigm is the need to avoid engaging in things that will provoke the anger of ancestors; and, and in some ethnic communities, such as among the Igbo of South Eastern Nigeria, the earth goddess and other forces of order in human society (Mbiti, 1969; Magesa, 1998; Nwoye, M A C, 2005). In this way, the social order in past Africa and even up to today, in rural African settings, is preserved without the need for the presence of law enforcement agencies such as the police and the prisons. In that way, too, people control themselves by fear of the anticipatory consequences of acting contrary to the prescriptions sanctioned by their ancestors and other spiritual agencies such as the earth goddess – in short, the moral code of the community of which they are a part. In this context, forces of fear, panic and anxiety tied to running against the dictates of the ancestors and other designated communal leaders/elders give rise within the Africentric paradigm to creative engagements and responsible living. This means that, in addition to Bandura's emphatic stress on the role of *visible models* in human personality formation, there is, in the African

perspective, the added recognition of *invisible loyalty* in people's consciousness towards the evaluative judgments and policing roles of hidden forces and agencies, such as their ancestors, in their day-to-day decisions about what to do and what not to do with themselves, with their lives and with others. In other words, the African psychological environment (as noted under the theme of the African worldview above) is peopled not only by visible and powerful human actors, but also by the recognized commanding hidden/metaphysical presence and concerns of invisible and non-human/spiritual agencies in the details of people's everyday experience (Achebe, 1958; Mbiti, 1969; Nwoye, 2005, Nwoye, 2006; Freeman, 2014). Hence, the crafting of the human person in the African context is influenced by the formative role of human and non-human agents in people's lives.

*(e) The pull or recognition of the priority of the community and the economy of investment in social support*

The typical African individual derives enormous strength of social motivation and psychosocial conviction from the philosophy of "I am because we are, since we are therefore I am" (Mbiti, 1969) – or in the sublime truth of the highly poetic expression of Freeman (2014), in "the priority of the Other." Through such various cultural expressions the African individual is made to awaken to the notion that humans come into the world and survive the helplessnesses of childhood, and ultimately become who they are through the contributions of uncountable assistances received from others (Freeman, 2014), such as from parents, neighbours, teachers, friends, age-mates, work mates, spouses, and some benign spiritual agencies such as our ancestors (Morrison, 2004). It is in this particular context that the following observation by Tutu makes a clear meaning. According to Tutu (2004: 25), "A person is a person through other persons. None of us comes into the world fully formed. We would not know how to think, or walk, or speak, or behave as human beings unless we learned it from other human beings. We need other human beings in order to be human."

Based on this understanding, namely that no one can make it in the dance of life by living in isolation from the community, the African individual is strongly motivated to awaken to the consciousness and importance of "the priority of the Other" (Freeman, 2014) and the community of which s/he is a part. Influenced by such a powerful motivational force, the individual considers it beneficial to submit to the life of reciprocity and mutuality and the phenomenon of co-responsibility in dealing with others; investing, by so doing, in the reciprocal support of others in times of need. Indeed, the fear of ostracization or social excommunication that follows the taking of an antagonistic and isolational stance against the community is what was responsible for the absence of institutional law enforcement agencies like the police in the pre-European Africa. In the past, people who, by their negative behaviour, worked against the social order of the community were

rejected by the community through the sanction of ostracization, the effect of which is that the person concerned will no longer be allowed to talk to or be talked to, or to buy from and sell to, any members of the community of which s/he is a part, unless such a person is ready to do away with his or her anti-social orientation and reawaken to the community. This resolution can often be achieved by paying for the damages incurred by his or her antisocial attitudes or unacceptable misdemeanours and impudence. This means that the distinctive way of life of the African human person that defines the meaning of the self of the individual finds meanings and gains validation largely in the communal sphere, the source of renewal from which the individual has been cut off.

The above indications mean that the Africentric theory of the making of the person shares a kindred spirit with Adler's (1956) theory of the power of social interest in human beings and the importance of the phenomenon of being-with others in the life of a human being as emphasized by Heidegger(1927/1985). Having said this, attention will now be turned to a more sustained exploration of the nature of personhood formation as seen from the Africentric paradigm.

### **3. The African perspective on the growth and development of the human personhood**

Human personhood within the Africentric paradigm is said to be influenced in its formation and development by a number of cultural/group socialization processes, local African traditions and customs, including “dance, songs, story-telling, heroic recitations, poetry, work-songs, dirges, and other oral art forms” (Mloma, 1995: 25). Other social processes in this regard include “songs of insult, challenge or satirical comment used as ‘politically effective weapons’” (Finnegan, 1970: 172) through which the young in Africa are taught, individually and in groups, to reflect on high levels of emotional maturity as valorized in the community in which they are a part. These mechanisms are used to implant in the young such virtues as positive use of silence or verbal sobriety, diligence, perseverance, patience, and moderation against extremes. These are virtues that are required for attending to adult roles in the society. Children are also taught, in some cases through engaging them in some special/age and gender-related initiation ceremonies, the positive transformations that can come through suffering in human life, and learning how to endure pain. In all cases, too, the young person is apprenticed on how to control his or her speech. Indeed, the man or woman who talks too much or who does not know how to keep secret is, for the African, one without value. S/he is avoided when serious matters are to be discussed among the ranks of elders. The African thus places a great premium on dominion over one's acts and conduct and in the power and control exercised over one's speech. Unnecessary chattering is, in most parts of past and contemporary Africa, understood as speech without a path and without seeds, while good use of silence is believed to constitute the antidote for the misdeeds of speech (Zahan, 1970).

In line with the above, in most ethnic and indigenous communities in Africa, such as among the Igbo of Nigeria, there is usually a popular myth that is used to drive home this point concerning the value of good use of silence. Among the Igbo, for example, one such myth is entitled “Why hawks eat chicks rather than ducklings” (Obiechina, 1993). And one version of the full text of such a myth goes as follows, as reported by Achebe (1958: 98), in his novel, **Things fall apart**:

*“Mother Kite once sent her daughter to bring food. She went, and brought back a duckling. ‘You have done very well’, said Mother Kite to her daughter, ‘but tell me, what did the mother of this duckling say when you swooped and carried its child away?’ ‘It said nothing’, replied the young kite. ‘It just walked away.’ ‘You must return the duckling’, said Mother Kite. ‘There is something ominous behind the silence’. And so Daughter Kite returned the duckling and took a chick instead. ‘What did the mother of this chick do?’ asked the old kite. ‘It cried and raved and cursed me’, said the young kite. ‘Then we can eat the chick’, said her mother. ‘There is nothing to fear from someone who shouts.’”*

The above story carries a great moral lesson for the psychological development of African children. They are enjoined to learn from the above story, the value of the tactical use of silence, which saves those who know how to practice it from life’s various troubles. Such a myth demonstrates that when we are tactless and talk too much in life, the result might be disastrous, just as it turned out to be the case in the life of the mother-hen. Based on the force of such myths and stories, in all initiatory and group socialization processes, particularly in East Africa, the young are invested with the idea that s/he who knows how to command his/her tongue avoids quarrels and misfortunes and shows himself/herself to be an example for emulation. In this context, the wearing of earrings, and rings in the lips and nose and the filing of incisors, still practiced among the Maasai of Kenya up to today, constitute for a girl in some parts of Africa so many trials she must bear in order to insure the harmonious development of her linguistic apprenticeship and to aid in making her a mistress of her speech.

These observations demonstrate that, in the Africentric theory of the development of personhood, one sign of a mature or fully realized person is the ability to control one’s tongue. And silence is understood as the supreme attitude as it is presumed to subsume integrity, courage, the power of the soul, prudence, modesty and temperance (Zahan, 1970). This is because, in African eyes, effective use of silence defines the man or woman of character and is the attribute of the wise man or woman.

Through myths and other story-telling practices, as emphasized above, as well as other customs and institutions of group socialization in Africa, the young African acquires a heritage of beliefs and attitudes that blend together to constitute his/her

person. Such processes and practices, in addition, promote the acquisition by the African children of a common idiom by which to live and navigate within the culture and community of which they are a part. The same orientation enhances their spirit of possession of an indigenous link and the feeling of a firm rootedness in their ethnic community. This prevents the fledgling African youth from emerging into a 'cocoon of confusion' (Lamming, 1973, 1975). Such practices and processes, in other words, function in concert with one another to help each African individual to know himself/herself as a member of a people, a member of a community, which includes the living and the dead, parents and forbears; inheritors of a history and a culture that tells him or her who s/he is and what s/he must nurture or proscribe, through memory and hope (Bellah, et al, 1985).

Against the above, Obiechina (1994) is therefore right when he asserts that stories impart indigenous knowledge and enable development of community values and cultural norms to the young. They also provide essential information and tools in dealing with the world outside the community, where one is consistently exposed to pressures and to the conflicting worldview of the neo-colonial world and its attendant prejudice. Extolling the importance of story in the making of a person, Achebe (1987: 124), in reply to the question of why he argues (in his novel, the **Anthills of the Savannah**) that the story is chief among teaching art forms, observes that "it is only the story that can continue beyond the war and the warrior. Story outlives the sound of war-drums and the exploits of brave fighters. It is the story, not others, that saves our progeny from blundering like blind beggars into the spikes of cactus fence. *The story is our escort* (emphases added); without it, we are blind". These days, some of these stories are passed on to the young through books in the form of African literature for children (Achebe, 1972).

In this way, there seems to exist a strong tie between the African view of the role of narratives in the cultivation of human personhood and the view of Bruner (1990), who argues that the cognitive revolution in the field of Western psychology, with its current fixation on mind as "information processor," has led mainstream Western psychology away from the vital aim of understanding mind as a product of culture and a creator of meaning. And according to Bruner, in concert with the fundamental philosophy of the Africentric paradigm, it is only by dismantling and freeing ourselves from the limitations imposed by the positivist/computational model of mind that can we be in a position to recognize and grasp the special interaction through which mind both constitutes and is constituted by culture. Based on this understanding, the destiny of human personality as understood within the Africentric paradigm appears to resemble that of the river which takes the colour of the earth through which it flows or is constituted.

## 4. Resources and processes in the cultivation of human personhood in Africa

### *(i) Instruments of promotion of human personhood.*

Apart from those resources and processes dedicated to the cultivation of human personhood in Africa, there are others such as direct teaching, peer modelling, and apprenticeship/ responsibility training, or the process of early-childhood “responsibilization”. The last entails the child being made to step into adult roles as early in life as possible, for instance by being sent on errands and being involved in home chores. Through this process, the African child is made to get involved early in living a life of responsibility through contributing, no matter how little, to the economy of the household. This is where there is a lack of congruence between the African approach to child upbringing and the Western way, where the child is made to believe that s/he is there to be served rather than to serve; and where before they (Western children) agree to get involved in taking care of home chores that fit their age, they may demand that a deal be struck so that they are paid for the services rendered. In contrast, African children in the rural communities see it, through African cultural induction, as part of their responsibility to participate in keeping clean the village streams as well as the footpath that leads to the village market or the village square. Through peer modelling, in particular, the African individual is able to draw guidance for his/her life and social conduct from the exemplary behaviours of his or her peers. Through the avenue of songs and proverbs, the young are given some thoughtful principles for reflecting upon life and for orienting themselves successfully through life. In this way, the evolution of human persons within the Africentric paradigm is conceived of, partly, as a kind of moral practice (Taylor, 1989; Cushman, 1993). And where such processes of humanization of the individual’s personhood in the African context successfully runs its course and the beneficiary internalizes and adopts and lives by the moral visions they embody, the individual comes to present a well cultivated human personhood.

### *(ii) Multiple agents of promotion of human personhood.*

Agents dedicated to the promotion of human personhood in rural Africa are many and varied. They include not only one’s direct parents but also all older adults of the community, such as our school teachers, including our “other mothers”, and in particular, our older siblings, the latter through the phenomenon of *sibling teaching* and caretaking (Mweru, 2005). Hence, there is emphasis on multiple attachment and caretaking of the child in the African context (Nsamenang & Lamb, 1995; Mweru, 2005), with the result that, supervision of children’s social conduct is a decentralized process, and a community affair. Social modeling is also emphasized in the African context. Fathers like to instil in their sons, and mothers in their daughters, their own behavioural signatures and patterns (Achebe, 1958). This means that in the African context the home and the community participate in the co-construction of human

subjectivities and thus represent the signature of human agency and personhood in the African paradigm, complementarily influencing people's ongoing personal development (Schneider, 2010). It should also be noted that here, in all cultures in Africa, the usual assumption is that excessive compliance to the child's wishes and requests will spoil the child (Achebe, 1958).

In addition, according to the Ghanaian philosopher Kwame Gyekye (1988), the well-cultured African individual, although originating from, and inextricably bound to, his family and community, nevertheless possesses a clear concept of himself or herself as a distinct person of volition. Indeed, according to Gyekye, it is from this combined sense of personhood and communal membership that the family and community expect individuals to take personally enhancing and socially responsible decisions and actions. Hence, although Gyekye (1988: 31) accepts that the dominant entity of the African social order is the community, he, at the same time, proposes that "it would be more correct to describe that order as amphibious, for it manifests features of both communality and individuality" (see also Nwoye, 2006). This is because the African psychological perspective seeks to avoid the excesses of the two exaggerated systems, while allowing for a meaningful, albeit uneasy, interaction between the individual and the community. In this way, the psychological maturity of the individual in the African context is measured by the extent to which he or she is able to balance successfully this complex equation of being both communal and individual in his or her orientation to the world (Nwoye, 2006).

## **Conclusion**

The present paper has been undertaken as an attempt to show that in Africa, as in other parts of the world, mature human beings are not born but made. And, that in making them, each culture, as in Africa, brings into the action its own notion and model, in form of moral visions embedded in its worldview, stories, proverbial narratives, and myths, of what needs to be done to turn a young baby from the raw materials of history and impulses of biology to the cultural habits and perceptions of personhood valorized in the community of which they are a part. The crucial implication of this discussion is thus that, because we hail from different climes and cultures, we owe the content and pattern of our personhood to the environments and cultures to which we belong. This again means that the idea of working out a generic theory of human personality or personhood that is applicable in equal amount and tension to each person everywhere in the world, in all shapes, colours and details, and free of the stamp of local cultural influences, must be viewed with suspicion (Schneider, 2010). This is because the moral visions which each culture places at the disposal of each member of the community in this process tend to differ from culture to culture (Christopher et al, 2014). But what is uniform across all cultures is the fact that the transition from culture to vision and to

personhood is made possible through the dialogical character of human beings. For it is through the process of dialogue that the moral visions of a culture, transmitted by its social teachers through stories, proverbs and myths, that go into the making of the person becomes realizable. Given the above, the notion of individual differences among African peoples can only be explained from the variation in biological endowment as well as from the readiness to dialogue with which each African child comes into the resources of culture and community that is placed at his or her disposal from his or her moment of birth onwards.

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