Chapter 4

Kwasi Wiredu’s Approach to Ecology:
Concepts of Personhood, Human Communication and Community
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*Land and its habitat are inseparable! It defines beinghood, belongingness and existence.*

4.1 Introduction: Africa’s Philosophical Roots

Africa, popularly known for its ancient human civilization, ecological diversity, rich culture, has struggled since long for its identity. In our search to answer what is African Philosophy, we ask where is Africa in the development of disciplinary knowledge. For many, African philosophy is necessarily rooted in the traditional belief systems of African ethnic and linguistic groups. This means that anthropology, not philosophy, has been the first source of African philosophy (even among indigenous scholars), as it articulates and analyzes local thought. But it also means that Africa has tended to be the object of analysis, the site for the application of Western methods of social scientific analysis. As well, Africa has been the focal point for a variety of interdisciplinary studies, which draw at least in part on philosophy. These include Black Studies, African-American Studies, Afrocentrism, Cultural Theory, Postcolonial Studies, and Race Theory.

For some, African philosophy has included African spirituality, religion, cultural tradition, and activism, while for others African philosophy is only philosophy if it is modeled closely on European forms of disciplinary methodology. Locating African philosophy in the disciplinary and interdisciplinary matrix can be difficult, but the pursuit of a pure disciplinary definition of African philosophy that fails to recognize linkages, debts, dynamic movement, and the history of discipline development is too restrictive. This, though, does not mean that just anything can be called African philosophy.
If we have asked the question ‘Where is Africa?’ and have answered that not only in geographical but also intellectual terms, one of the results is to try to map the territory. Henry Odera Oruka (1990), for instance, mapped the ‘trends’ of African philosophy. These were not exactly schools of philosophy since they were not that organized. They were, rather, answers to the question of particularity (“African”) and universality (“philosophy”), which had found popularity. Initially there were four:

i. Ethnophilosophy: This approach to philosophy regarded the collective traditional wisdom or the generally held ontological assumptions and worldview of African ethnic groups or tribes as having the status of philosophy.

ii. Sage Philosophy: This was Oruka’s own essential contribution. Through interviews, he identified the ‘philosophical sages’ within a culture, those who were more than repositories of cultural wisdom (these he called ‘folk sages’), and brought a critical edge to that wisdom.

iii. Nationalistic/Ideological Philosophy: Oruka recognized that political figures such as Senghor, Nkrumah, Nyerere and others dealt with philosophical issues even as they engaged in emancipatory projects and nation-building.

iv. Professional Philosophy: This category includes those trained in western techniques or in western universities. Thus, it is a category that describes the identity of a group of philosophers, rather than a specific style of philosophy, although most explicitly worked European traditions, occasionally with little attention to the particularity of Africa itself.
Later, Oruka added two more trends:

v. Literary/Artistic Philosophy: Literary figures such as Ngugi wa Thiongo, Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Okot p’Bitek, and Taban lo Liyong all reflected on philosophical issues within essays, as well as fictional works.

vi. Hermeneutic Philosophy: This was the analysis of African languages for the sake of finding philosophical content. The work of Barry Hallen and J. O. Sodipo, as well as the work of Kwame Gyekye, would fit here. The term ‘hermeneutic’ has been used by a number of other philosophers (Okere 1983, Serequeberhan 1994) to mean something closer to the contemporary European sense—the philosophy of interpretation, in an African context.

Other four classifications of African philosophy suggested by A. J. Smet and Oleko Nkombe (1980) are:

(i) ‘Ideological philosophy’, or the reaction to theories and prejudices, which, in the past, supported the slave trade and later justified colonization

(ii) ‘Traditional philosophy’, or the reaction to the myth of the 'primitive mentality' of Africans, which through hermeneutical restoration, speaks of asserting the existence, solidarity, and coherence of traditional African philosophies.

(iii) ‘Critical philosophy’, or the reaction to and questions about theses or projects of the two preceding trends.

(iv) ‘Synthetic philosophy’, or the assumption of preceding trends and the orientation of the data collected toward a hermeneutical, a functional philosophy or a search for new problematics.

V. Y. Mudimbe (1983) distinguished between African philosophy in the broad and the narrow sense. He defined it broadly as, ethnophilosophy and ideological-philosophical thought that
addresses African social life in the past and the present, respectively. In its narrow sense, Mudimbe saw four stages of development in African philosophy, beginning with those who reflect on the possibility of African philosophy and ending with those who engage in philosophical hermeneutics.

These categories, and others, give direction to a developing field, while also become contested sites. They inevitably prioritize some activities over others, and in some cases suggest a historical or conceptual development (sometimes culminating in the thinker’s own approach to African philosophy). This is a matter of determining what the criteria might be for classifying the philosophical efforts of particular racial and ethnic groups as a distinct variety of philosophy. The question is especially important in light of the complicated historical developments involving global dispersal and the subsequent development of regional entities (e.g., the Caribbean), complex local or national identities (e.g., African Americans), and nation-state groupings (e.g. “Nigeria,” “Kenya”), all involving African and African-descended people. Determining how it is possible to speak of “Africana philosophy” in a cogent way is the work to be further pursued, in part by exploring the heuristic promises of the notion?

So, African philosophy does tend to philosophically reflect on the question of what it means to be African! A great deal of African philosophy in the twentieth century has focused on addressing meta-philosophical questions. In order to unravel the philosophy of pre-colonial Africa, we have to engage in the philosophical discussion that have held in the post-colonial times. Since the pre-colonial era as well as in the origins of African history there is no written record of its ancient wisdom.  

\[45\] African philosophy has comparatively few texts before the middle of the twentieth century, and fewer sustained conversations among those texts. Bruce B. Janz, *African Philosophy*
African traditional outlook was intensely humanistic. This stands justified, because the crux of the traditional outlook is based on moral principles. The entire traditional thinking about the foundations of morality is refreshingly non-supernaturalist. Though, one cannot find in these traditional sources elaborate theories of humanism. But when one reflects on these traditional speeches about morality, we come across their concern with human welfare. For example, in the cultural tradition of Ghana, it was believed, what is morally good is what befits a human being – it brings dignity, respect, contentment, prosperity, joy, to humans and their community. And what is morally bad brings misery, misfortune, and disgrace. ‘One finds an aesthetic strain in the African traditional ethical thought – what is good is conceived to be what is fitting, and what is fitting is what is beautiful.’ Such aesthetic analogies are indeed there in the moral languages of other cultures (within Ghana, Africa and also the rest of the parts of the world). Thus the culture of a group of people is their total way of life. It is seen in their work and recreation, in their worship and courtship, in their ways of investigating nature and utilizing its possibilities; also in their ways of viewing human-nature relationship and interpreting their place in nature. All this and, perhaps, more are relevant when one talks of a culture.

A gradual philosophical approach in one culture will perhaps give scope for probing into it’s fundamental inquiries. As we know, in order to change the tough habits underlined in a custom held by its forefathers, could be possible by appropriate education. As a result, education has to begin right from early ages with rational, logical and analytical training. Education is emphasized here, because, Africans are living in a transitional epoch in which their choice of actions and habits of mind are governed, sometimes unconsciously, by inherited traditional conceptions in combination with ideas and attitudes coming to them from other non-African sources (colonial). This eventually results into confusion in the minds of

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46 Wiredu, Philosophy and African Culture, p. 6
the people living in Africa and outside Africa. So one has to venture on to this philosophical journey of bringing in clarity within the African cultural belief systems by unfolding the deep and universal thoughts within it.

So, African philosophy deals with metaphysics, epistemology, axiology, and methodology, as well as with the problems and opportunities of intercultural philosophizing, and does so in ways that cover the array of the analytic/continental divide in Western philosophy. The essential feature arising out of the above discussion is human nature and experiences as they are basically the same all over the world. And the ability to reason logically and coherently is a part of human rationality. Kwasi Wiredu is one of the leading figures in African philosophy who belongs to the trend of Professional philosophy. He adopts a hermeneutic style in the philosophical analysis of concepts in a given African language (Akan⁴⁷). Akan, one of the principal groups of people in West Africa, reside in the Gold Coast, the Ivory Coast, some parts of French speaking West Africa. The Akan language for communication is called Twi (Twui). The word is to be pronounced as Akane, which means the “foremost,” “genuine,” derived from the root word ‘kan’ meaning first.⁴⁸ One of the theory states that the Ghana or Akan culture was the same as the old Babylonian civilization known as Akkad, Agade or Akana, who lived on the Tigris and Euphrates. This theory is strongly supported by the evidence of common features in language of the ancient culture and of the modern, as also in their customs. The Akan have traditions relating to both Egypt and Sumer.

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⁴⁷ An ethnic group in Ghana and in parts of adjoining Ivory Coast. In Ghana they inhabit most of the southern and middle belts and account for about half of the national population of 14 million. The Akan have been the subjects of some famous anthropological, linguistic and philosophical studies.

⁴⁸ Christaller’s dictionary (Christaller:1933, p.224) A-kane, (noun)-the first foremost, or former place, rank or time; at the first; before; formerly; previously; di kan – to be first, foremost to go before kan

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4.2 Kwasi Wiredu

4.2.1 Life:

Kwasi Wiredu was born in 1931 in Ghana and had his first exposure to philosophy quite early in life. He read his first couple of books of philosophy in school around 1947 in Kumasi, the capital of Ashanti. These books were Bernard Bosanquet’s *The Essentials of Logic* and C.E.M. Joad’s *Teach Yourself Philosophy*. Logic, as a branch of philosophy attracted Wiredu because of its affinities to grammar, which he enjoyed. He was also fond of practical psychology during the formative years of his life. In 1950, he came across another philosophical text, which influenced him tremendously. The text was *The Last Days of Socrates* that had the following four dialogues by Plato: *The Apology, Euthyphro, Meno and Crito*. These dialogues influenced, in a significant way, the final chapter of his first groundbreaking philosophical text, *Philosophy and an African Culture* (1980) some part of it is also dialogic in structure.

He got enrolled in the University of Ghana, Legon in 1952, to read philosophy, but before attending he started to study the thought of John Dewey on his own. However, it was C. E. M. Joad’s philosophy had particularly a powerful impact on him. Indeed, he employed the name J. E. Joad as his pen-name for a series of political articles he wrote for a national newspaper, *The Ashanti Sentinel between 1950 and 1951*. At the University of Ghana, he was instructed mainly in Western philosophy and he came to find out about African traditions of thought more or less through his own individual efforts. He was later to admit that the character of his undergraduate education was to leave his mind a virtual tabula rasa, as far as African philosophy was concerned. In other words, one had to develop and maintain interests in African philosophy on our own. One of the first texts of African philosophy that he read was J. B. Danquah’s *Akan Doctrine of God: A Fragment of Gold Coast Ethics and Religion*. 
Wiredu’s close associate William Abraham, in Oxford University, influenced the direction of his philosophical research towards African thought.

Wiredu began publishing relatively late, but has been exceedingly prolific ever since he started. During the early to mid 1970s, he often published as many as six major papers per year on topics ranging from logic, to epistemology, to African systems of thought, in reputable international journals. His first major book, *Philosophy and an African Culture* (1980) is truly remarkable for its eclectic range of interests. Nonetheless, he had not only laid the foundations of his project of conceptual decolonization at the theoretical level but had also begun to explore its various practical implications by his analyses of concepts such as “truth,” and also by his focused critique of some of the more counter-productive impacts of both colonialism and traditional culture. His another very acclaimed work on *Cultural Universals and Particulars—an African perspective*, asserts that universals, ‘rightly conceived on the basis of our common biological identity, are not incompatible with cultural particularities and, in fact, are what make intercultural communication possible.’

**4.2.2 Influences**

As one of Africa’s foremost philosophers, Kwasi Wiredu has done a great deal to establish the discipline of philosophy, in its contemporary shape. In most parts of the African continent and beyond, a great amount of intellectual work goes to his credit. Wiredu is well versed in Western Philosophy, especially the Anglo-Saxon analytic tradition that sees philosophy essentially in terms of logic, analysis and clarification of terms. This is the impression one gets from his writings. In order to appreciate the conceptual and historical contexts of his
work, it is necessary to possess some familiarity with relevant discourses in African studies, history, anthropology, literature and postcolonial theory\textsuperscript{49}.

Wiredu’s contribution to the making of modern African thought provides an interesting insight into the processes involved in the formation of postcolonial disciplines and discourses, and it can also be conceived as a counter-articulation to the hegemonic discourses of imperial domination. Wiredu for decades been involved with a project he terms “conceptual decolonization” in contemporary African systems of thought. By conceptual decolonization, Wiredu advocates a re-examination of current African epistemic formations in order to accomplish two aims. First, he wishes to challenge disagreeable aspects of tribal culture embedded in modern African thought so as to make that thought more rational, practical and sustainable. Second, he intends to remove unnecessary western epistemologies that are to be found in African philosophical practices.

4.3 Wiredu’s Humanistic Ecology

Wiredu as mentioned earlier was a passionate humanist and a concerned environmentalist. his philosophical works revolves around the nature of human personality and his connect with the other. While exploring the Akan tradition and culture, he brought out the significance of personhood in totality. The researcher feels this attempt of Wiredu has been fruitful in connecting human-human, human-society and human-nature relationships. His cultural and native reflection on Akan traditional philosophy brought about the deep-rooted connections to the surface over the years. In the process of this exploration he discusses ethical dimension of this philosophy. He believed that goodness at all times shall pay. The Akan tribe narrated ‘good actions’ of humans will be rewarded and the passage to heaven will be naturally paved.

\textsuperscript{49}Postcolonial theories in Africa advanced by Edward W. Said, Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha, Abiola Irele and Biodun Jeyifo.
The good actions involves certainly a human’s responsibility towards environment. These ecological commitments found in his writings are necessary to be recalled and recognised in today’s context.

4.4 Concept of personhood

Wiredu proposes to draw an account of his own native understanding of the Akan language that is enshrined in the Akan traditional philosophy.⁵⁰ The culture of the Akan people of West Africa dates from before the 13th century C. E. Like other long established cultures the world over, the Akan have developed a rich conceptual system complete with metaphysical, moral, and epistemological aspects. The story of the Akan and other African cultures is important to our understanding of human origins. These cultures have preserved in their traditions and oral histories an intimate knowledge of life and living. They reflect a reality that is wide in scope, deep in insights and very different from western cultural understanding that dismisses these stories as primitive myth. In reality Akan culture have preserved in story, dance, singing, drumming, celebrations and initiatory practices the ancient, more accurate story of our human origins, which can be traced through the evolution of language and culture. Of particular interest is the Akan conception of person, a conception that informs a variety of social institutions, practices, and judgments about personal identity, moral responsibility, and the proper relationship both among individuals and between individuals and community. In Philosophy and an African Culture (1980), Wiredu gives a preliminary list of some of the concepts such as, God, Nature, Person, Mind, Truth, Fact, Free will, Responsibility; and Conceptual contrasts such as, the material and the spiritual, the secular and the religious, the natural and the supernatural, the mystical and the non-mystical.

⁵⁰ The word Akan refers both to a group of intimately related language found in West Africa and to the people who speak them. Best known among the Akan subgroups are the Ashanti. Closely cognate are the Denkyira, Akims, Akwapims, Fantes, Kwahu, Wassas, Brongs, and Nzimas, among others.
Wiredu believes the concept such as God (Cosmic Architect)\textsuperscript{51} and its ontological affiliations like creation, created beings, existence, life, death, life after death, etc. have substantial implication with respect to the Akan concept of a person. According to the conception of a person found among the Akan’s of Ghana, the ethnic group, a person is constituted by nipadua (body) and a combination of entities conceived as spiritual substances, namely, okra (soul), sunsum (personality), and mogya (blood). The process of formation of life is both spiritual and biological; the spiritual one is attributed to God.\textsuperscript{52} The idea that every human being has one’s own unique destiny, that is, expressed in Akan communal thought in a very dramatic way. In fact, the Akan word for destiny, which is, nkrawea, means, literally, manner of taking leave. The high point of the proceeding is the announcement of destiny.\textsuperscript{53}

Interestingly, when a person descends from on higher planes, says an Akan maxim, a person lands in a town, a community, or a society. The biological life formation starts with the close proximity of man and woman. Accordingly, the physiological make-up of a person is attributed to both partners. To the mother the Akan’s ascribe the origin of a person’s mogya (blood). Socially, this is the most important constituent of a person; something passed from the mother determines a person’s clan identity or basis of the lineage. The Akan’s are a matrilineal society. It is this kinship status that situates a person in the most intuitive relationships and brings into the most existential networks of obligations, rights and privileges that characterize Akan collectivism. To the father is attributed the origin of an aspect of human personality which is, conceptually, somewhat abstract. Both the inner cause and the outer effect are called sunsum (personality) in Akan, a human characteristic to which the Akan’s are especially very sensitive.

\textsuperscript{51} Akan’s belief of cosmos, a religious universe and God is held at the apex.
\textsuperscript{52} God (the Akan cosmic architect) apportions a part of himself in the form of okra (soul) for dispatch to the earth to be born as man and woman. Before the departure there is a ceremony at which the okra, alone before God, takes leave of his or her maker.
\textsuperscript{53} God reveals to the okra, what career awaits her or him on earth and how it shall culminate? Thereupon, the okra descends to be incarnated into a human society to fulfill that blueprint.
Wiredu states, the *Akan* concept of a person is both descriptive and normative. Descriptively, in a person constitutes the life principle - *okra* (soul), clan identity passed on from the mother - *mogya* (blood) and the distinctive personality ingredient inherited from the father – *sunsum* (personality). The difference in ontological character, then, between the *okra* (soul) and the *sunsum* (personality), on the one hand, and the *mogya* (blood) and the bodily frame as a whole, on the other, is only one of degree of materiality. The body is fully material and the other constituents – *okra* (soul) and *sunsum* (personality), being partially material, so the *okra* (soul) survives death to become ancestor whereas the *sunsum* perishes with the death of the body. Metaphorically, death struck those bodies that are either vulnerable and weak or possessed by some extra-human agent such as a witch. A strong personality will withstand it.

The normative concept of personhood flows from it descriptive aspect, here the idea is that every human being has an intrinsic worth because of the divine element in it. In *Akan* thinking, and in the conceptions of many other African thoughts, a person in the true sense is not just any human being, but one who has attained the status of a responsible member of society. According to Wiredu, ‘the characterization of the status of a person also brings out the characterization of *Akan* system of values.’ From the *Akan* point of view, a responsible member of society is the individual whose conduct, firstly, depicts the necessary condition that shows sensitivity towards moral principles in the strict sense through harmonious adaptation of one’s own interest with interest of others in society. Secondly, it intimates the collectivist ethos of *Akan* society through judicious thinking and hard work, is able to achieve a reasonable livelihood for oneself and one’s family simultaneously making valuable contributions for the well being of other members of one’s extended family – relatives & friends – and the wider community. Thus *Akan* ethics is humanistic ethics that is formed exclusively to bring out human well-being. From the above description on personhood, Wiredu concludes that, such a personhood is susceptible to degrees. Moreover, he emphasizes
that personhood is not an attribute that one is born with but rather an ideal that one strives to achieve in life.

This overview presents the *Akan* conception of persons as seen by two major contemporary *Akan* philosophers, Kwasi Wiredu and Kwame Gyekye. These scholars present two very different accounts of the concept, particularly with respect to the relationship between social recognition and innate characteristics to personhood. Examining the *Akan* concept of personhood from these two different viewpoints highlights both the richness of the concept as well as many ways in which the resulting perceptions contrasts with the western perspective. Among those contrasts the focus is to be drawn towards four major ones as mentioned below: (1) the continuous nature of personhood, (2) the means by which individuals achieve full personhood, and the implications of this conception of personhood for (3) the relationship between individuals and the community and (4) the *Akan* understanding of responsibility and freedom.

The debate between Wiredu and Gyekye provides insights regarding not just the substance of the conception of personhood, but also the way empirical evidence can be used to inform philosophical analysis. In this particular case, the *Akan* view of personhood has, like many other metaphysical and moral conceptions, far-reaching effects on social practices and institutions. Using facts about these practices and institutions to reconstruct a idea of personhood underscores another important general theme in African philosophy: the practical implications of philosophical principles on everyday life. For the *Akan*, judgments about personhood are not matter of merely academic interest, but play an important role in shaping and supporting their highly communal social structure. To the extent that the *Akan* notion accommodates a common humanity as an innate source of value, it supports moral equality. At the same time, its emphasis on the social bases of personhood helps firmly to embed trust, cooperation, and responsibility to the community in cultural practices. The *Akan* philosophy
of persons thus represents an attempt to resolve questions of identity, freedom, and morality in favor of a communalistic way of life that has evolved as a rational adaptation to the constraints of survival under harsh conditions. The Inter cultural communication scholars tend to focus their efforts on the interactions between individuals culturally diverse backgrounds…. says, Casmir (1997, p.7)

i) Degrees of Personhood

In an attempt to express the essence of the Akan concept of persons, Kwasi Wiredu refers to former Zambian President Kaunda's concept of person to which he ascertains a particular significance within the African cultural context. As Kaunda explains, “personhood is not an automatic quality of the human individual; it is something to be achieved, the higher the achievement, the higher the credit” (Wiredu 1992, 104). The view of personhood as a matter of degrees, as exemplified in Kaunda's remark, is also a defining characteristic of the Akan notion of personhood.

The Akan word onipa is an ambiguous term, sometimes referring to a member of a biological species and sometimes referring instead to a human who has attained a special kind of social status (Wiredu 1992). According to Wiredu, this dual meaning reflects an important conceptual distinction between a human—a biological entity—and a person—an entity with special moral and metaphysical qualities. Status as a human is not susceptible to degrees, nor is such status conferred on an individual as a ‘reward’ for his/her efforts. One is either a human or one is not—there is a thing as becoming a human. In contrast, personhood is something for a human to become to different degrees through individual achievement. An individual's human status then is a necessary but not sufficient, condition for personhood.

Under this interpretation, the ‘payoff’ for attaining higher degrees of personhood is directly related to rights and privileges that can make a significant difference between success and
failure. The more rights and privileges an individual enjoys, the more social wealth that individual acquires (in the form of access to lineal networks and the resources they control). A person—taken in its fullest sense—is therefore an individual who, through mature reflection and action, has both flourished economically and succeeded in meeting one’s (often important) responsibilities towards family and community.

The distinctive qualities of this concept of persons (as interpreted by Wiredu) are brought out when contrasted to the analysis of another leading African philosopher, Kwame Gyekye, who takes issue with this graduated conception of person. Gyekye specifically objects to the role that social status plays in Wiredu’s view of personhood, arguing that it is inconsistent with the natural or innate moral equality of persons derived from their common humanity. That is, we are human persons before we are anything else and it is the human person that matters from the moral point of view. Not surprisingly, Gyekye quotes Kant’s categorical imperative approvingly when arguing that human persons are, as members of the ‘kingdom of ends,’ equally independent of their empirical or accidental characteristics (be they social or even genetic qualities).

According to Gyekye, it is essentially our human capacity to reason—not other incidental or accidental predicates—that serves as the basis for moral worth. In this respect, one cannot point to such accidental characteristics as height, gender, age, marital status, race or social class as basis for personhood:

What a person acquires status, habits, and personality or character traits: one, qua person acquires and thus becomes the subject of acquisition, and being thus prior to acquisition process, one cannot be defined by what one acquires. One is a person because of what one is, not because of what one acquires (Wiredu & Gyekye 1992, p.108).

Gyekye is quick to note that there are some Akan expressions and judgments about the life and conduct of people that appear to give the impression that personhood is something that is acquired or bestowed upon one in virtue who takes responsibility in the community. For
example, *Onye nipa* is a moral judgmental expression used among the *Akan* to describe someone who appears in his conduct to be wicked, bad, and ungenerous to others. In fact, a person of high moral standards or conduct would be described approvingly as *oyeonipapaa*—literally, she is a real (human) person. In contrast, an individual who fails in one’s striving in the *Akan* community may be judged as *onipahun*, which literally means “useless person,” which is a shameful expression.

According to Gyekye, however, these expressions should not be taken literally, but instead merely to reflect “status, habits, and personality or character traits” that one acquires over the course of one’s life, not personhood. For him, personhood is prior to and independent of such acquisitions. To conceive of personhood as a continuous property capable of degrees is to confuse conventional notions of status—a highly variable quantity—with the notion of personhood, a constant for all human persons.

The relationship between Wiredu's and Gyekye's analyses of personhood is brought out more clearly by considering the status of infants, vis-a-vis personhood. *Akan* linguistic conventions distinguish infants from full persons on the basis of their lacking intellectual and moral maturity. Wiredu repeatedly at various occasions emphasizes the dynamic characteristics of personhood. Yet the infant (or *onipa*) is also accorded a baseline level of respect by virtue of one possessing the *okra* (soul). In that respect, an infant is entitled to the respect due to any other human, regardless of age, or capability. (Wiredu & Gyekye 1992)

As interpreted by Wiredu, these conventions clearly indicate that certain kinds of achievements—be they moral, intellectual, or social—are, for the *Akan* constitutive of personhood, not merely indicators of such status. But at the same time, Wiredu takes those conventions to indicate the importance of the infant's status as a human, since it entitles the infant—and for that matter, all other humans—to a minimum level of respect. The
significance of humanity, he argues, is that it is a necessary (although not a sufficient) condition for personhood. From Wiredu's perspective, possession of the *okra* (soul) confers one *condition* of self-respect, not self-respect itself in its totality. To acquire self-respect, one must build upon that basis to achieve greater degrees of moral agency and in so doing, achieving greater degrees of personhood.

The difference in status between those possessing merely the *okra* (soul) and those who have achieved a higher degree of personhood can be thought of in terms of the difference between the quality of moral *agency* and degrees of moral *responsibility*. Among the *Akan*, phrases like *onye nipah* (“he is not a person”) or *onipahum* (“useless person”) indicate that an individual is a moral agent, one that is equal to all others with respect to having the potential for full personhood—though a potential that the individual has not realized. In fact, to pass a judgment that someone is an *onye nipah* is a way of respecting the person as a moral agent; not holding an adult responsible in this way would be indistinguishable to failing to respect their moral agency.

The two levels of personhood (one discrete, the other continuous) proposed by Wiredu allows him to account for much of the social and linguistic data while also satisfying many of the moral intuitions underlying Gyekye's own purely discrete interpretation. Thinking again, for example, about the concept of a human being. As expounded by Wiredu, what makes an entity a human being is simply his or her possession of the *okra* (soul). This can be translated into Gyekye's Kantian dialect as the claim that one's status as not just a human being but as a moral agent rests solely on one's capacity for reason. The normative implication of possession of the *okra* (soul) or the capacity for rationality is that the entity is entitled to an irreducible respect matched by irreducible rights—like the negative right not to be killed unjustly, or the positive right to be given what is needed to sustain life. The social bases of personhood supplement this minimum level of inherent respect. In this way one can say that all persons
are human beings but not all human beings are persons. Further, all human beings are potential moral agents. This is a status (capacity for rationality and morality) accorded to an infant.

The implications of the two-tiered view of personhood presented by Wiredu are nicely illustrated by Akan practices following the death of an infant. Despite the obviously tragic circumstances of such a death, no funeral ceremonies are permitted in Akan society for infants. According to Wiredu, the reason for this naturally follows from the minimal level of personhood achieved by infants: It is not that infants are not valued or cherished by the Akan; rather, it is that they are just not the kind of individual for whom such a ceremony is appropriate. The Akan funeral is a form of send-off for the departing soul on the journey to the ancestral world—a journey for which a child does not qualify because it hasn't attained personhood. Thus, the death of a child is not a time for mourning. Instead, parents are expected to behave normally and cheerfully.

The different treatment accorded to deceased adults and children is a manifestation of what we can refer to as the Akan theory of selective reincarnation, a view that postulates that otherwise deserving humans who have failed to fulfill their potential for achieving a higher degree of personhood a second chance in the world. For the Akan, those who die in infancy are obvious candidates for this form of reincarnation, since they have failed to make good on their potential but not through any lack of effort on their part. In that respect they are, what Wiredu calls ‘limbo people,’ humans with an untapped potential for full personhood and the opportunity to return to life to make good on that potential.

On its face, the theory of selective reincarnation may appear to be nothing more than a curious feature of Akan cosmology. As presented by Wiredu, however, it is part of a general process of making moral agents. Appreciating the role of selective reincarnation among the
Akan thus requires acknowledging the whole process by which morally responsible agents come to be, as well as how individuals become motivated to be moral. Critical to this appreciation is the understanding that the entity underlying this process exists beyond the life of a physical human being. The *okra* (soul) that forms the ‘core’ of the human being (and the returns through the process of selective reincarnation) precedes one's life as a human and constitutes one end of this process. At the other end is the Akan ancestor, the culmination of the process of becoming a person whose memory serves as a moral exemplar to the living that guides the moral journey of the *Akan*. Those who become ancestors are those who, through their imagination, intelligence, and empathetic identification with their fellow human beings, excel not in spite of but because of all the challenges that are put before them. After having lived a full life, they obtain their ‘ticket’ (to use Wiredu's imagery) to the ancestral world and are reincarnated into service-ancestors.

Gyekye rejects this explanation, along with Wiredu's analysis of *Akan* personhood. He argues instead that any such explanation of *Akan* social and linguistic conventions must presume the personhood of even the youngest human:

> A human person is a person whatever his age or social status. Personhood may reach its full realization in community, but it is not acquired or yet to be achieved as one goes along in society. What a person acquires are status, habits, and personality or character traits; one, *qua* person, thus becomes the *subject* of acquisition, and being thus prior to the acquisition, he cannot be defined by what he acquires. One is a person because of what he is not because of what he has acquired (Wiredu & Gyekye 1992, p.108).

For Gyekye, then, differences with respect to personhood cannot account for the difference in how the *Akan* deal with the death of infants and adults. He prefers instead to account for these differences in terms of the utilitarian value of cultural practices such as the different treatment of the deaths of infants and adults. The most obvious reason for the difference, according to Gyekye, is that the size and magnitude of death celebration depends on the social status of the deceased individual. The death of a wealthy and well-connected person will naturally call for
a more elaborate ceremony than the death of a newborn, quite independently of their status as persons.

This is not to say that Gyekye denies the role that the idea of reincarnation plays for the Akan in the formation of persons. For him, however, the idea of reincarnation (and of the graduated concept of personhood) is less a factual account of personhood than a moral narrative, such as the ones postulated by Aquinas, Kant, Bentham, and John Stuart Mill to explain and justify moral precepts. The central narratives of Western moral philosophy (such as the social contract) provide vivid images that motivate individuals to act in certain ways. In the same way, the Akan narratives of reincarnation and personhood serve to reinforce socially valuable traits and practices such as cooperation and industriousness.

From this perspective, what might be called the expressive content of public action—the message to the Akan community conveyed by the ritual and symbolic performance, the public utterances of the Akan leaders—is the most important effect of such ceremonies. These ceremonies are a powerful symbolic mechanism for both expressing and shaping the values and beliefs of the Akan people. Thus, the Akan may abstain from mourning a rapist or a murderer to express their collective abhorrence of the offending act.

ii) Achieving Personhood

The criteria for achieving personhood in Akan society are based on two kinds of considerations. The first is the natural fact that we tend to care for our kin and feel responsible for those with whom we are in close reciprocal relationships. The second is that societies need some way to encourage and support members' feelings of empathy for those beyond their families.

According to Wiredu, in Akan society marriage and procreation are a necessary, but not a sufficient condition of personhood. It is important that an individual's household be
administered by a joint equal partnership of spouses and that the children are healthy and well nourished. If an individual were to take responsibility for the upbringing of distant relatives or were to shoulder the burden of rearing non-relatives and allow his household to become a magnet for relatives and extended family, then such an individual will score very high in personhood, as indicated by references to him as *oye 'nipa*, meaning, he is “a real person” indeed, according to Wiredu.

More than this one is required to make concrete material contributions to the well-being of one's lineage, which is quite a sizeable group of people. A series of events in the lineage, such as marriage, births, illnesses and deaths, gives rise to urgent obligations. The individual who is able to meet these in a timely and adequate manner is the true person (Wiredu & Gyekye 1992, p.107).

Individuals failing to meet these standards attract criticism. Other members of *Akan* society will point to them and say *onnye 'nipa* (“he is not a real person”). As a literal rendition from the *Akan* language, this expression could simply mean that the person is not doing her part.

Criteria pertaining to one's relationship to those in the community beyond one's immediate family include being an active and unstinted participant in community projects (such as building bridges, constructing roads, and cleaning public spaces, as well as attending to the death, burial and mourning of a deceased member of the community). Along with activity in community projects is involvement in civic rituals (such as fellowship associations, rotating credit groups, extended family gatherings, secret societies, hunting groups, village watch groups, and civil militia groups) that have face-to-face meetings. Requiring participation in these practices, in effect, solves what economists refer to as “free rider” problems by allowing information about each person's efforts and contributions to spread quickly through the community. Everyone takes mental note of those missing from such events and repeated foot-dragging during community work is criticized. Although the emphasis is on negative scoring,
when individuals score very high they receive community titles that, on their death, bestows upon them special honors from other members. These departed individuals are treated as living on in a social sense, reincarnated in the ancestral world where they continue to guard the living. While there is no limit to how high one can rise on the scale that indicates degrees of personhood achieved, there is a limit to how far one can fall.

An adult ‘do little’ might descend to the level of simply a human with only the basic dignity and the unconditional rights inherent in that status. The fall ends there, because all individuals possess an okra (soul), which sets lower bounds on how far they may descend on the scale of personhood. In this sense all humans have moral value that entitles them to basic dignity and unconditional rights whether they have attained personhood or not.

iii) Individual and Community

Wiredu's critics have argued that he fails to recognize that individuals have their own will and can at least to some degree, choose their own goals. His position seems to endorse a form of ‘tyranny’ of the community over the individual. Gyekye insists that this is wrong—both descriptively and normatively (Wiredu & Gyekye 1992, p.105). He agrees that “the whole gamut of values and practices in which the individual is necessarily embedded is a creation of cultural community and is part of his history” and that this indicates a close relationship between the communal structure and individual's goals. Yet this close relationship hardly implies that the communal structure is the only factor the individual is required to consider in analyzing these goals. According to Gyekye, individual persons as participants in the shared values and practices, and enmeshed in the web of communal relationships, may find that aspects of those cultural truths are not elegant, not dignifying or definitely not enlightening and can thoughtfully be questioned and evaluated. The evaluation may result in individual's affirming or amending or refining existing communal goals, values and practices; but it may
or could also result in the individual's total rejection of them. The possibility of reevaluation means, surely that the person cannot be absorbed by the communal or cultural apparatuses.

By reserving for individuals at least the potential for responding to or rejecting the communal consensus, Gyekye locates a source of identity that is in some meaningful way independent of any particular society. This is a self that can “participate in the determination or definition of its own identity.”

Gyekye correctly recognizes that the possibility of self-criticism requires that one be able to distance oneself from one's own community or circumstances: However, it is not clear that this is a particularly serious problem for Wiredu's account, for even he allows that individuals can critically assess their communal values. It is, after all, this ability to look at one's culture with new (and critical) eyes that makes moral reformers (of which there have been many among the Akan) possible. These moral reformers may stand against the communal values but the ones that may make an impact and be selected for reincarnation as an ancestor is one that give reasons to reject or revise values that persuade the community. Understood in this way, moral reformers not only have a place in Akan society, but qualify as persons with secured ‘tickets’ to the ancestral world.

iv) Responsibility and Free Will

An important condition for achieving personhood is that the agent has the ability to act on the basis of rational reflection. Wiredu indicates what is meant by “damaged personhood” by pointing out that an Akan adult of unpredictable behavior will bring the judgment that “so-and-so is not a person (onye onipa),” a comment that leaves open for further investigation whether the damage was done by psychological or environmental factors, or by brute bad luck. “The problem in Akan is ‘when is an individual responsible?’ And the answer in this brief account of the Akan approach to deviant conduct is that an individual is responsible to
the extent that his conduct can be modified through rational persuasion or moral correction.” Wiredu concludes that once the cause of the unpredictable behavior is determined, irresponsibility may change into non-responsibility, for in the *Akan* philosophy of person, where there is free will there is responsibility. This in a subtle way he applies to human-nature relationship.

Since there is a merit component to personhood, it is relevant to talk of the distribution of the opportunity of achieving personhood so as to secure respect over and above the threshold respect that is due to human beings in virtue of their status as human beings. Goods like positions of prestige that are conferred to individuals who have achieved personhood are limited by their very nature, but given equality of opportunity, no person should be denied from the outset the chance to secure those goods. Here, then, is a tension, for what does the society do to those who are born handicapped or crippled in such a way that they are not in the position to achieve personhood in ways that able bodied people can? What happens to X born in a family of thieves and in a neighborhood full of burglars? Surely, X did not choose to be born in that family much less in the neighborhood and this may affect his/her performance in an attempt to achieve personhood. In other words how does one account for equality in unequal circumstances?

The answer provided by the *Akan*, according to Wiredu's interpretation, is to conceive of the status required for personhood as defined relative to an adult individual's starting position or initial capacity. Wiredu explains that, for example, an adult who behaves erratically or in an immature manner would be presumed to have failed to be a full person. Such a presumption, however, is merely a presumption, an inference drawn from the superficial qualities of the individual's action relative to what could be expected of the average individual. If the individual changes his or her behavior, that inference may be revised. If, however, the
behavior persists, the individual’s family members may summon an expert—a geomancer—capable of determining if he or she is acting out of free will.

Provided that the behavior is found not to be deliberate or that she is not acting from her free will, the community will gather and it will be said of her a message of this tenure: “It is not her eyes, it is not her head, it is not her mind,” i.e., she is not responsible for her erratic actions. In making this judgment, the community will be changing irresponsibility to non-responsibility. This is the way the Akan has for equalizing background conditions of individuals in their attempt at dealing with the difficulties of equality in unequal circumstances. It is against this background that we can begin to make sense of Wiredu's claim that freewill and responsibility are two sides of the same coin among the Akan.

v) Personhood and Social Status

Many commentators agree with Gyekye that the essential ingredient of a human is what the Akan refers to as okra (soul). There is, however, some disagreement over the nature of okra (soul). According to Gyekye, the okra (soul) is that which constitute the innermost self, the essence, of the individual person. Okra (soul) is individual's life, for which reason it is usually referred to as okrateasefo, that is, the living soul, a seeming self-evident truth that yet is significant. The expression is intended to emphasize that okra (soul) is identical with life. The okra (soul) is the transmitter of the individual’s destiny (fate: nkraheea). It is explained as a spark of the Supreme Being. The presence of this divine essence in a human being may have been the basis of the Akan proverb, “All men are the children of God; no one is the child of the earth (Gyekye 1987, 85).

While Gyekye maintains that okra (soul) can be accurately rendered into English as ‘soul,’ Wiredu insists upon drawing a somewhat more subtle distinction between these concepts. For Wiredu, okra (soul) is “that whose presence in the body means life and whose absence means
death and which also received the individual's destiny from God.” The very crucial point of their disagreement, is the normative implication of the presence of *okra* (soul). The normative implication is that *okra* (soul) bestows on its possessors basic irreducible respect matched by basic irreducible human rights.

Like Wiredu, Gyekye recognizes that there are standards for which individual persons aim that have an important role in how people think of themselves and their place in society. Unlike Wiredu, however, Gyekye denies that facts about a person's ambitions or goals add or subtract from that individual's status as a person.

The individual may fail in his strivings and, in the *Akan* community, for example, may consequently be judged as a “useless person” (*onipahum*), a term associated with shame. But it must be noted that what the individual would be striving for in all these exertions is some social status not personhood. The striving is in fact part of the individual's self-expression, an exercise of a capacity he/she as a *person*. Even if at the end of the day he failed to attain the expected status, his personhood would not for that reason diminish, even though he may lose social respect in the eyes of the community. So that it is social status not personhood at which individuals could fail (Wiredu & Gyekye 1992, p.111).

Instead, then, of treating persons as a kind of individual that admits of degrees, Gyekye employs criteria of personhood that are quite independent of individual aims and actions. He maintains that, while persons may differ with respect to how they are treated in a community, this difference is a matter of the social status accorded each, not facts about their status as persons.

As a result, personhood defined in terms of social achievement and personal relationships aptly serve to establish those networks conducive to creating the flow of information and obligation necessary for the promotion of communal trust. So conceived, the *Akan* notion of
personhood helps to support social cooperation and provides a framework superbly suited to resolving collective action problems. The Akan have fashioned a means of motivating individuals to contribute to the social good while still ensuring that the moral value of even the most unproductive individual is retained. For the Akan, personhood is the reward for contributing to the community and the basis of the individual's moral worth is located in an independent source—a common humanity.

4.5 Philosophical Analysis of Human Communication

Ever since the pre-colonial era as well as in the origins of African history there is no written record of its ancient wisdom. Bruce B. Janz (2009) states, African philosophy has comparatively few texts before the middle of the twentieth century, and fewer sustained conversations among those texts.

For this reason we consider the “Rationality Debate,” which provides a historical background, to many of the issues and problems discussed in African Philosophy today,’ says D.A. Masolo in his book titled African Philosophy in Search of Identity (1994). Over the period of years, the philosophical dialogues has been shaped into many forms and has debated on a variety of topics and ideas with reference to individual’s role and their intellectual pursuits in the shaping of Africa’s Identity.

Foremost, the central point of in this debate has been on “reason”, which is considered as a yardstick to measure the civilized from the uncivilized. There is sustained conversation between African philosophy and European philosophy. A conversation that for long time had been rather one-sided. Secondly, African philosophy seems to be a philosophy of cross cultural conversation and encounter. In its most fundamental level, the conversation is
between different ethnic, linguistic, cultural and religious traditions within the continent. Thirdly, the ‘conversation’, or encounter, between African cultures and other cultures. Lastly, the conversation that, emerge from the history of slavery and emigration, that is, the conversations between African philosophy and the philosophies of the various African diasporas.

Further, while analyzing the most fundamental level of conversation taking place between different ethnic, linguistic, cultural and religious traditions within the continent. Especially, Hegel’s provocative doctrine regarding the definition and roles of reason as the controller of the world and of history, and regarding the exclusions of Africans from it is highly debated by scholars. We come across divergent views from the studies carried out by anthropologists, sociologists and philosophers that emerged in the twentieth century. Masolo states, ‘in anthropology the question of reason and its role in sociocultural transformations of reality was critically discussed by the evolutionists, particularly by Edward Burnett Tylor and Lewis Henry Morgan\(^\text{54}\) (1877). On one hand, both Tylor and Morgan advocated the notion of reason by presenting their case from historical point of view that human nature is already charted and is composed of specific features that are universally shared, which diverged profoundly from Hegel. And on the other hand, Sociologists such as Emile Durkheim and Claude Levi-Strauss (1910) greatly influenced by structuralist tradition put forth their notion of reason from ahistorical side. These differences of evaluations with regard to the nature of reason and its roles underlying between the historicist and the ahistoricist have lead to the difference of outlook that exists between the ethnophilosphy school and its opponents.

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\(^{54}\) Unilineal evolution (also referred to as classical social evolution) is a 19th-century social theory about the evolution of societies and cultures. It was composed of many competing theories by various anthropologists and sociologists, who believed that Western culture is the contemporary pinnacle of social evolution. Different social status is aligned in a single line that moves from most primitive to most civilized. This theory is now generally considered obsolete in academic circles.
In Africa, it is the ‘mystic mentality that prevails.’ It showcases, a society made up of mystic mentality with certain incompatibilities, which may not necessarily be logical contradictions, can in fact coexist. But a naturalistic scientific observer would reject calling it impossible. The only problem therefore appears to be that western thinkers (especially Europeans), in contrast to the African seers, use the word impossible in relation to facts, which refer to the general conditions of experience. In other words, western seekers, reject all mystical experience calling it absurd, labels them as impossible notions and takes recourse to naturalistic experience in order to superimpose, establish and interpret as per their notions. The contemporary African philosophers find this faulty and as a mission have ventured to establish firm channels of human communication that clearly indicates their cultural significance.

According to Frantz Fanon (1959), history is a process, within it cultural ideologies abolish each other through alienation. In this sense, cultures are usually defined on the basis of discriminatory categories like race or other social units such as ethnicity or class. But race, ethnicity, class and similar discriminatory classifications are themselves ideological concepts whose contents shift with the variables of required alliances and targets in social relations. To paraphrase Fanon in Mudimbe’s words, ‘history is the dialectical process of the politics of otherness.’ Therefore, for Fanon, supremacy in intercultural and intracultural relations depends on the ability to demonstrate one’s preferability over others. This preferability is not judged on the basis of what is rationally or theoretically satisfying, but on the basis of what is emotionally and “pragmatically” satisfying. Any form of cultural supremacy is due to the function of a successful process of discrimination. And the world is full of examples of this: developed versus developing; capitalism versus socialism, affluent verses non-affluent, etc., which portrays the world as a place for continuous cultural conflicts and competitions. So, for Fanon, ‘the world is one big collection of active and emotive dialectical relations, in the sense
of cultural strives, whether explicit or implicit. It is in this way too that Africans became an invention of western discourse, they became The Africans.’ (p.9)

The details of this intellectual struggle have been well explained by V.Y. Mudimbe in his book The Invention of Africa (1988). Mudimbe’s profound work consists of powerful genealogy of African episteme as a product of a complex interplay of different forms, of colonial power both political and cognitive. This in Mudimbe’s view, lead in alienating and objectifying Africans as the “the other.” Having influenced by most of the powerful structuralist philosophers, Mudimbe gives an excellent structural historiography of African culture.

4.6 Philosophy of Cross-cultural Conversation and Encounter

A common response to those who wish to discuss African philosophy is that there is no one concrete foundation on which it rests, rather there are many, made up of various interconnecting and conflicting groups such as tribes, nations, countries, and linguistic groups that we come across while dealing with it. How could there be an African philosophy? despite this skepticism toward the usefulness of ‘African’ as a category, it persists.

There are reasons for this persistence. Africa since the Enlightenment had been regarded as a place incapable of philosophy. In the Philosophy of History, Hegel used Africa as the foil against which all reason could be contrasted. It was not the Akan or the Kikuyu in particular that were regarded as incapable of reason, but all (sub-Saharan) Africans. To be unified in rejection, in this manner meant that it made sense to see a common resistance to this theorized and universal racism. To the extent that Africa continues to be seen as a unified and clear category by the rest of the world, if only in rejection, it continues to make sense to resist the reductionist move which would locate philosophy primarily in ethnic groupings. V. Y. Mudimbe (1988) has articulated this by arguing that ‘Africa has been a construction of
Europe, in the sense that Europe needed its ‘other’ on which to project its fears and aspirations,’ and Kwame Anthony Appiah has also taken up the question of the meaning of Africa, specifically in terms of ‘race’ (1992).

Where do intellectually Africa end and the rest of the world start? What is the intellectual relationship between Africa and its various diasporas? Is there such a thing as a ‘pure’ culture in Africa, which allows us to identify truly African concepts or cultural artifacts and can possibly ground and guarantee a truly African philosophy?

For Wiredu, culture and within it prevailing cultural experiences itself is to be considered ‘pure’. According to him, philosophy is an indispensable preparation for cross-cultural evaluations of thought, as it presents with a conceptual clarity, when any two or more cultures are taken into consideration. Especially, the study of African culture as a rule has been undertaken from an anthropological point of view. This has no doubt provided important insights, but amid the constraints of the cultural transition that is taking place in contemporary Africa there is a need for critical and constructive analysis. And Wiredu believes philosophy plays a responsible role in this connection.

He is of the opinion that it is both a function and in fact a duty, of philosophers as well as the subject of philosophy in any society to examine the intellectual foundations of its culture. An examination of culture can be of real use as it has been formed on the basis of reasoned criticism and at times by reconstruction. For human welfare, criticism and adaptation are the only way for philosophical progress.

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4.7 An Eco-Bio-Community.

The African traditional culture places great value to communal fellowship. Africans towards their extended family, larger community, and nature have often spontaneously expressed the sense of solidarity and fellowship. Many visitors to this land have remarked that the Africans attitude towards social life consists of a comprehensive understanding of humanity and fullness of life. This quality in African culture is unique and still loaded with humanist essence amidst all the industrialized and technological developments. When we compare African society with those societies in which industrialization and technology has taken over to a high degree, we find the qualities of spontaneity and fellow feelings towards other humans and environment have declined. In fact the eco-bio-communitarianism of Africa is more thoughtful in social welfare in comparison to the liberal policies of social welfare adopted in the west. The former promotes inter-dependency, while the latter endorses self-dependency. Further, an inter-dependent society develops values of reverence, concern and compassion toward each other. Whereas, self-dependent leaves its members isolated. To illustrate, the idea of a person in Akan thought entails the principle of commitment to social values of the community. Humans need family and community for their biological, cognitive and moral growth. And family and community is not limited to one’s own, rather has to be understood in its extended sense, it also includes ecological or environmental family and community. In response to these needs there is an extensive network of kinship relations, which generates, according to Wiredu, a thick system of rights and obligations.

In the African folk tales, the stories reflect the culture where animals abound; consequently, the monkey, elephant, giraffe, lion, zebra, crocodile, and rhinoceros appear frequently along with a wide variety of large birds such as the ostrich and the eagle; the smaller varieties such as parrots, pigeons, etc. The animals and birds take on human characteristics of greed,
jealousy, honesty, loneliness, etc. Through their behavior, many valuable lessons are learned. Also, the surroundings in which the tales take place reveal the vastness of the land and educate the reader about the climate, such as the dry season when it has not rained for several years, or the rainy season when the hills are slick with mud. The acacia trees swaying in a gentle breeze, muddy streams that are home to fish, hippos and crocodiles, moss covered rocks, and giant ant hills that serve as a "back scratcher" for huge elephants, give the reader a sense of the variety of life in this parched or lush land in this part of the world.

Like African philosophy, the ideas and beliefs of the African society that bear on ethical conduct have not been given elaborate investigation and clarification and, thus, stand in real need of profound and extensive analysis and interpretation. Wriedu very strongly puts forth, “the Akan moral outlook is thus logically independent of religion.” An *Akan* proverb has it that “one is not born with a bad ‘head’, but one takes it on from the earth.” The maxim means, among other things, that a bad habit is not an inborn characteristic; it is one that is acquired.

Let us consider, the judgment that a human being is “not a person”, made on the basis of individual's persistent unethical behavior, implies that the practice of moral virtue is considered intrinsic to the conception of a person held in *Akan* moral thought. The position here is this: For any p, if p is person, then p ought to display in his behavior the moral norms and ideals of personhood. When the behavior of a human being fails to conform to the acceptable moral principles or standards, or when a human being fails to display the expected moral virtues in his conduct, he is considered to be “not a person.”

The evaluative judgment opposite to the one we have been considering is “he is a person” (*oye onipa*). This judgment is not a descriptive judgment at all, even though it can be used descriptively, as when in a forest one hunter made that judgment to his colleague hunter who thought he saw a beast and was about to shoot it: the judgment “he is a person” (*oye onipa*)
would in that context be used descriptively by the other hunter to distinguish a human being from a beast. Thus, a descriptive use of that judgment would be obvious and easily understood.

Thus, the common membership of one universal human family constitutes a legitimate basis for the idea of universal human brotherhood (or unity). This idea is depicted in, for instance, the *Akan* maxim:

Onipa mua ne onipa
‘Man’s brother is man.’
Or, A human being’s brother is a (or another) human being.

The maxim asserts unmistakably that a human world and non-human world have their own identity and they are interdependent. Implicit in the African perception of humanity is the recognition of all persons, irrespective of their racial or ethnic backgrounds, as brothers. This is the reason why in African cultures the word ‘brother’ is used to cover various and complex family relationships related through blood ties. But the word is also used, significantly, by persons between whom there are no blood ties; thus, the word is used comprehensively. The comprehensive meaning given to the word ‘brother’ in African cultures is intended, indeed, to lift people up from the purely biologically determined blood relation level onto the human level, the level where the essence of humanity is held as transcending the contingencies of human biology, race, ethnicity, or culture.

A humanistic morality, whose central focus is the concern for the welfare and interest of each member of community, obviously result in social morality, which is enjoined by engaging in social life itself. The nature of African morality depicts social life or solidarity as natural to the human being because every human being is born into an existing human society. A traditional *Akan* thinker quotes from a proverb that says, ‘When a human being descends from the heavens, he [or she] descends into a human town [or, a human society].’ The point of the
maxim is that the human being is social by nature. This view reminds us of Aristotle's concept of 'politics' that 'The human being is by nature a social animal', that is, that a human being is by nature a member of a polis, a human community. The word *politikon* used in Aristotle's dictum means 'social' rather than 'political.' Being a member of the human community by nature, the individual is naturally related or oriented toward other persons and must have relationships with them. The natural solidarity or relationships of human beings would—and should—prescribe a social ethic, rather than the ethic of individualism. Individualistic ethics that focuses on the welfare and interests of the individual is not at all regarded in African moral thought.

African social ethic is expressed in many maxims (or, proverbs) that emphasize the importance of the values of mutual helpfulness, collective responsibility, cooperation, interdependence, and reciprocal obligations. A few of these, are listed from the *Akan* tradition:

*onipa viye firi onipa*

The well-being of man depends on his fellow man.

This proverb expresses, not that a person should always look to another (or others) for his well-being and the attainment of his goals, but that there are occasions when the demonstration by another person (or other persons) of goodwill, sympathy, compassion, and the willingness to help can be a great boost to a person's attempts to achieve his goals, to fulfill his life. The dependency noted in the above mentioned proverb is to be put down to the limited nature of the possibilities of the human individual. Human limitations are in fact expressed in the following *Akan* proverb:

*onipa nye abe na ne ho ahvia ne ho*

Man is not a palm-tree that he should be complete (or, self sufficient).
The proverb points out the inadequacies of the human being that make it impossible for him to fulfill his life, socially, economically, emotionally, psychologically, and so on. It is evidently true that in the context of the society, in terms of functioning or flourishing in a human society, the human individual is not sufficient, for her capacities, talents, and dispositions are not adequate for the realization of her potential and basic needs. It is only through cooperation with other human beings that the needs and goals of the individual can be fulfilled. A social ethic that recognizes the importance of the values of mutual help, goodwill, and reciprocity is the kind of ethic that will counter the lack of human self-sufficiency in respect of talents and capacities in many ways help realize his basic needs.

Reciprocity and interdependence are forthrightly expressed in the following Akan maxims:

\[
\text{wo nsa nifa ho horow benkum, na benkum nso ho horow nifa}
\]

The right arm washes the left arm and the left arm washes the right arm.

This proverb is derived from our day-to-day experiences that the left arm cannot wash itself. Only when the two arms wash each other that both become clean: thus, the need for interdependence.

\[
\text{Obra ye mbooa}
\]

Life is mutual aid.

The Akan word *mbooa* means ‘helping each other to work on the farm’. In the farming communities of rural Ghana, when a farmer realizes that work on the farm cannot be completed within a certain time if he did it single-handedly, he would request the assistance and support of other farmers in the community. The other farmers would readily lend a helping hand to that farmer, who would, in this way, achieve his productivity goals and do so on time. The same request would be made, whenever the need arises, by the other farmers on different occasions. So there is a sense of reciprocity that is natural and hence moral too. It is this kind of experience that led an Akan traditional thinker to create this proverb on the word
‘life’ (obra), which has been made to cover other spheres of the human life than the purely economic (or agricultural). Refusing to offer help to others and consistently seeking one's own good and disregarding the good of others will result in one's being denied the help and goodwill that may be necessary to achieve certain ends. Since you refused to help someone who needed your help or someone who was in distress, you are likely to meet the same refusal or denial when you need some help—perhaps an emergency situation in which more help than the others is required. The morality of a shared life, as in any community, thus demands mutuality or reciprocity as a moral mandate in a world in which human beings, weak and limited in many ways, are subject to vulnerable situations. Mutual aid, then, becomes a moral obligation.

That a human being, due to the limitations, deserved to be helped is expressed in the following maxim:

\[
\textit{onipa hia moa} \\
\text{A human being needs help.}
\]

The \textit{Akan} word \textit{hia} is translated as ‘needs’, which, as used in this maxim, has a normative connotation; thus, it does more than simply expressing a fact about human life or the human condition. The real meaning of the maxim, then, is that a human being deserves, and therefore ought, to be helped. It also means that a human being must be regarded as an object of moral concern and should therefore be entitled to help by others in the appropriate circumstances. The reason why you should help someone in need is also given in the following maxim, among others:

\[
\textit{Wo yonko da ne wo da} \\
\text{Your neighbour's situation is [potentially] your situation.}
\]

Two important things about this maxim need to be pointed out. One is that the maxim is stated in references only to the pitiable, miserable or unfortunate situation of another person
(referred to in the maxim as “your neighbour”—wo yonko) or other people (your “neighbours”). These unfortunate situations or circumstances insistently call for the demonstration of sympathy, compassion, and willingness to offer some help. The other important thing about this maxim is that the word ‘neighbour’ in the maxim does not necessarily refer to the person next door or in one's community but to any other person in your community and beyond: even in far-off places and also means eco-bio-community.

The basic or ultimate thrust of the maxim is that you should not show insensitivity to people who are in pitiable situations, for one day you might be in that situation too and would need the help others: thus, your neighbour's situation is potentially your situation; every other person is basically you. Social morality thus demands mutual reciprocity as a moral mandate in a world in which human beings can easily overcome—even overwhelmed—by the contingencies of the human condition and existence. Altruism is, thus, a fundamental moral value.

Insensitivity to the needs and hardships or suffering situations of others is rejected in Akan morality, as it is, indeed, not accepted in the moralities of all human cultures. In Akan moral thought and practice, a maxim that rebukes the lack of feeling for others is put thus:

etua wo yonko ho a, etua dua mu
When it sticks into your neighbour's flesh, it is as if it stuck into a piece of wood.

“Sticking into your neighbour's flesh (or, body)” is another way of referring to the suffering, misfortune, hardship, or pain of another person. When something, such as a needle, sticks into your own flesh or body, you feel the pain. If it stuck into another person's—your neighbour's—flesh, you would not directly feel the pain. Even so, you should not feel insensitive to the pain or suffering of that person and shrug off your moral shoulders, for the
other person's body is certainly not a piece of wood that cannot feel pain. Empathy, as a moral virtue is to be cultivated right from young age.

The above-mentioned maxims and many others similar to them in content and purpose all underline a social morality. There are many African folk sayings, such as:

Cross the river in a crowd and the crocodile won’t eat you, or
When cobwebs unite, they can tie up a lion, or
Only a tree’s necessary branches are maintained while others are pruned and burnt.

whose conclusions are intended to affirm the values of social morality—the kind of morality that is centered on human relations. The social character of morality requires that the individual member of the society, ever mindful of one’s interests, adjust those interests to the interests and needs of others. This requires a person to give due consideration to the interests and welfare of others. Necessarily embedded in a human community, the individual person has a dual moral responsibility: for him or herself as an individual and for others as co-members of the community with whom she shares certain basic needs and interests.

Therefore African idea of ecology is an exhaustive area of study. It emphasizes on personhood and its conceptual understanding cannot be held exclusively of environment. Rather there is an underlying meaning in Wiredu’s writing on personhood that has an indirect connect with human-nature relationship. He logically analyses the human personality consisted within moral dimension in such a way that it reflects into the environmental concerns. As in the analysis of African philosophy, we understood it consists of plethora of areas and specializations from myth to religion, art to anthropology, history to culture, science to politics and so on. The researcher has focused on one of its dimensions highlighting Wiredu’s writings on Akan tradition explaining human-nature relationship.
References

Books


Journal Papers


**Citation**
