

## **AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY AS CULTURAL INQUIRY**

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PART I.

POWER, PERSONHOOD, AND AGENCY

## Introduction to Part I

### Power, Personhood, and Agency

Both anthropology and philosophy share questions about how the concept of the person is defined and used in social interaction. These disciplines take rather different approaches to the answers they provide. Both are concerned with distinguishing between the continuity over time that enables agents to characterize an individual as a "person" and with the epistemological problem posed by the differences between social attribution and self knowledge. In the essays in this section, the anthropologists Parkin and Shaw as well as the philosopher Kaphagawani are concerned with defining and examining ideas about power, personhood, and agency, about how human beings in interaction with one another produce effects on the world. In general, anthropological research on these topics tends to be cross-cultural or comparative and sociological in outlook, while the philosophical literature is more definitional and analytic. Both Shaw and Parkin argue, for example, that notions of self are functions of social histories and explain how different societies cope with or adapt to their different social environments. Shaw uses a meticulous examination of Temne idioms of secrecy to critique the notion that there are essential differences between societies which can be drawn along the divides separating such dichotomies as individual versus society; self versus person; free versus constrained; and active versus passive, which have been used as models for understanding African notions of personhood and agency and for contrasting them with their Western opposites.

Through her gender-based examination of Temne interpersonal dynamics and discourses of personhood and self, Shaw argues that relational understandings of personhood attributed to African societies do not necessarily exclude the possibility that persons act as knowing "selves" in their capacity as social and political beings, that they engage in reflexive and critical monitoring of action and interaction. The latter understanding of personhood perhaps predates but runs close to the Enlightenment idea of the autonomous individual self as the seat of epistemological and moral agency, the subject of political and legal rights and freedoms (Mauss 1939; Carrithers et al. 1985; Fortes 1987). With time, these ideas were brought into radical contrast with what were presumed to be collective and communal senses of identity that were taken to be characteristic of rural and/or "primitive" folk. Thus, communalism came to

signify backwardness, a sort of constraint on the individual sources and forces of progress.

Arguing against the received wisdom about folk societies Shaw, like Lienhardt and Fortes before her, demonstrates that writings on African personhood have overemphasized the communal model, that it is not true that the two variable understandings of self mutually exclude each other according to the society types in which they operate. Rather—and she refers to Carrithers et al. (1985: 236)—“the social circumstances of society in which a certain *moi* conception comes into being influence the form which the *moi* conception might take.” Thus, the conception of self among the Temne of Sierra Leone clearly reflects their techniques of dealing with a social world rendered untrustworthy by its own history. The secrecy that surrounds the self and the Temne idiom “tok af, lef af” reflects a cultural alertness to the practice of social-economic predation during the slave trade and to the need to protect the self by partially concealing, disguising, and making it invisible in the face of the trappings of the public and historical arena, which came to be defined principally in terms of the fears and insecurity which it unleashed on its inhabitants.

Like Shaw, Parkin also argues that the separation and opposition of atomistic and relational conceptions of self so central to Western academic discourse do not always hold as contrasts in non-Western systems of thought. Thus, the coastal Swahili people of Kenya and Zanzibar hold a view of autonomous human agents that is not incompatible with their Islamic belief in divinely ordained human destiny. While they assert that an individual's human character is materially fixed and unalterable by virtue of their distinctive humorous balance as Muslims, they also believe that personal fate is shaped by the way a person and his environment respond and relate materially, morally, and religiously to this fixity of character. Parkin argues that in the idioms of the Swahili themselves, there seems to be no conflict between the demands of Islam and the healing techniques of Arabic- and Galenic-influenced medical science. They combine beliefs in the fixity of the mix of primary humors in the makeup of people's bodies and selves, in their propensity toward certain character traits and vulnerability to particular ailments, as well as in the healer's ability to change these.

The philosophical essay in this section (Kaphagawani) is an exercise in African metaphysics. Like Shaw and Parkin, Kaphagawani also argues against the reduction of African notions of self and personhood into the dual categories of communal and individualistic. All three authors criticize existing descriptions of the metaphysical components of African notions of personhood as being only partially correct due to misconceptions, poor translations, or the socio-geographic limitations of their ethnographic fields of reference. The out-

come is the view that African notions of self and personhood are much more complex than the image of them provided in dualistic models that sharply discriminate between “West” and “non-West.” Kaphagawani points out, for example, that the ideas about African concepts of personhood produced by Tempels are problematic precisely because Tempels tried to turn them into a sharp contrast to the Cartesian viewpoint. The result was something like the empiricists' indeterminate yet undeniable idea of personal identity, something like “a logical construction out of psychic events.”

In Kaphagawani's view, Tempels's theory of the Bantu concept of force reproduces a fundamental ambiguity in the philosophical literature on personhood—viz., that the person is divided between the mind, defined as a collection of ideas, and a material body. According to Kaphagawani, Tempels did not realize that by framing this problem in this mode, he made it a linguistic issue more than a metaphysical problem. Kaphagawani's concluding view is that the analyses of African conceptions of personhood, self, or personal identity, which he deals with, have not done full justice to the full range of African discourses and diverse expressions on these issues.

In a sense, we have come full circle. The essays in this section of the volume recapitulate the arguments made against ethnophilosophy by African philosophers (Karp and Masolo, 1998). The same conceptual scheme that locates African philosophy as a collective enterprise located in a subject lacking the capacity for critical self reflection also eliminates the productive tension between two primary aspects of the self, the person and the individual (Lienhardt 1985; Riesman 1986; Fortes 1987; Jackson and Karp 1990; Karp 1997). The studies of personhood and its associations with power and agency contained in this volume demonstrate that understanding African cases requires careful description of contexts for social action; attention to such aspects of cosmology as ideas about nature, human nature, and society; and examination of the ends of actions themselves.

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## I. "Tok Af, Lef Af": A Political Economy of Temne Techniques of Secrecy and Self

Rosalind Shaw

Studies of person and self in Africa have long been used as foils for Western concepts of person and self. In one of the best-known instances, Placide Tempels's *Bantu Philosophy* (1959), Western concepts of individuality are placed in opposition to Bantu concepts of the person as constituted genealogically:

For the Bantu, man never appears in fact as an isolated individual, as an independent entity. Every man, every individual, forms a link in a chain of vital forces, a living link, active and passive, joined from above to the ascending line of his ancestry and sustaining below the line of his descendants. (1959: 108)

In studies such as Tempels's, characterizations of personhood have often drawn upon (largely implicit) ideas of agency. As a "link in a chain of vital forces," for

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