PERSON, NOTIONS OF

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See also Cabral, Amilcar Lopes.

PERSON, NOTIONS OF

[There are vast differences between African cultures, both over time and at any point in time. In this entry “African” refers to features that many, if not most, African cultures have in common, whether on the African continent or throughout the African diaspora. Similarly, “European” refers to societies sharing a European language and culture, whether in Europe or not. Many of the peoples on the North American continent are “European” by this definition. Comparisons such as those attempted in this essay are about cultural forms and social actions. People can live in more than one culture at one and the same time and may experience no difficulty “being African” and “European,” just as many people can speak two or more different languages.]

The ideas and actions that make up the “category of the person” are substantive universals, part and parcel of the culture of all societies at all times and in all places. In different cultures ideas about the person are similar in function but exhibit differences that can be attributed to the ways in which ideology, history, and social organization affect the interpretations people make of their experience of self and other. In the disciplines of philosophy and anthropology the term “personhood” is used as a shorthand for describing and interpreting different solutions to a universal existential dilemma: the problem of reconciling the lived experience of our changing physical bodies and sets of discordant experiences with the sense that there are unifying themes mediated through a single entity, which we call a person. Philosophers tend to seek justifications for choosing among different concepts of personhood, while anthropologists have pioneered the investigation of different vernacular concepts of the person, located across time and space. Both disciplines attempt to understand the underlying assumption or grounds that enable people to say the movement of a body through time and space and the accumulation of a set of experiences denote a single person, or exhibit a definable personhood, the characteristic or quality of being a person.

Commonsense answers to the dilemma of personhood often refer to attributes of the person such as character traits or social status, so that it may be said that someone is a person because of his or her standing or office or because he or she exhibits characteristic patterns of behavior. Nor is this simply a matter of classifying others. The interpretation and knowledge of self is as much a problem of personhood as understanding others.

However, no society relies on common sense alone. All peoples have evolved theories of the person that provide guides to classifying different people and categorizing the experience of self and other. These theories explain why people act the way they do, interpret their experiences, and predict their actions and fates. The terms these theories use are derived from religious and moral concepts or from cosmology. They encode ideas about physical and social growth and development, motivation and personality, and the consequences of action.

Ideas about the person also entail descriptions of the capacities and powers that persons have to carry out their actions and locate these powers and capacities in the image of the body. In the traditions of European societies, for example, dualistic models using categories such as body and soul (in religion) or the body and mind (in psychology and philosophy) define the basic terms of a theory about the person that makes a radical distinction between physical capacities and powers on the one hand and mental and moral capacities and powers on the other hand.

In many African cultures mental and moral capacities and powers are located in the body rather than opposed to the body. Among the Iteso people of Kenya and Uganda, for example, the heart, etaupis, is the seat of emotions, while the head, akou, is the seat of experience. The head guides the heart, which provides vitality and energy to the body. At first sight the Iteso model appears very similar to European commonsense discourse about the person, in which the heart is often made equivalent to the soul or is the seat of emotions, and the mind is located in the activities of the brain, operating through the senses found primarily in the head.

Contrasts Between African and European Concepts of Personhood

In most, if not all cultures, vernacular concepts of the person use the body as a model for constructing the person. Hence it is not surprising to find similarities between the African and European concepts of personhood. For comparative purposes, however, the differences count far more than the shared ideas and attitudes. There are at least four
By contrast, African concepts of the person are far more often articulated in a worldview that defines individual fate as not only imposed from without, but the responsibility and concern of coalitions activated during circumstances of crisis and focused on resolving the breaches in social relations that are perceived as an underlying cause of the misfortune that it has been the fate of the afflicted person to suffer. Once again this contrast is more a matter of degree than absolute contrast. The development of therapeutic models in European healing systems, such as family therapy, tend to recognize that influences on a person's fate can be the result of another person's actions and that solutions are dependent on working within the social network of the afflicted person.

Few European forms of group therapy are as elaborate as the therapy groups that emerge in contexts of illness and affliction in many parts of Africa. There is no doubt that stress and mental illness are effectively dealt with in the context of African healing, and European psychotherapies have been shown to be no more successful in remediating psychological illnesses or reconciling social antagonisms.

The Study of Personhood in Africa

The literature on personhood in Africa owes its inception to Marcel Mauss’s seminal essay on the concept of the person, “Une catégorie de l'esprit humaine: La notion de la personne, celle de moi.” In this essay Mauss reminded his audience that etymologically “person” derives from the ancient Latin persona, which referred to the mask and role performed by an actor in a play. Mauss argued that the Roman concept of the person evolved into what he termed “la personne morale,” which refers to the social definition of the person in terms of its status and roles and rules governing actions and social relationships. Relying on evolutionary assumptions, Mauss postulated distinct stages in the development of concepts of the person, culminating in the evolution of the “moi,” the individual self, which he believed to be characteristic of capitalist societies. There is some justification for applying to whole societies the traits that Mauss attributed to each of his theoretical stages. The contrast between the extreme individualism attributed to capitalist society and the more socialized concept of personhood and social relations in Africa and elsewhere seems valid and is reflected in the contrasts between African and European concepts of personhood drawn above. What is untenable in Mauss, however, is the assumption that non-European or noncapitalist societies had no concept of individual selfhood.

For any society, the distinction between what the anthropologist Meyer Fortes termed “person” and “individual” is critical for understanding the significance of concepts of personhood in everyday life. Looking at it from the objective side, the distinctive qualities, capacities, and roles with which society endows a person enable the person to be known to be, and also to show himself to be the person he is supposed to be. Looked at from the subjective side, it is a question of how the individual, as actor, knows himself to be—or not to be—the person he is expected to be in a given situation and status. The individual is not a passive bearer of personhood; he must appropriate to him or herself the qualities and capacities of personhood, and the norms governing its expression.

The distinction between person and individual transforms Mauss’s evolutionary framework into a form of analysis that seeks to understand behavior not as it has evolved from one society to another but in terms of context and social situation, in relationship to everyday life. One of the most significant aspects of the concept of the person addressed by Fortes’s distinction between person and individual is the complex and changing relationship between the socially prescribed and the individually experienced, in which locally based, vernacular interpretations about personhood are developed. There are no better examples of how Africans distinguish between person and individual than those described in Fortes’s essays on personhood among the Tallensi people of Ghana. In “On the Concept of the Person Among the Tallensi,” Fortes shows us that African solutions to the dilemma of identity as manifested in concepts of the person have epistemological and social dimensions; norms defining the person are generally experienced only by deviations from them or failures to conform to them—just as individuality is experienced only through conformity to or deviation from norms. This is not just a matter of conformity but rather is part of an elaborate cosmology and set of social ideas that Tallensi use to make sense of social and individual experiences. This Fortes illustrates in Oedipus and Job in West African Religions (1959), his study of Tallensi interpretations of fate and destiny.

The inability or failure to live up to the most fundamental aspects of Tallensi concepts of the person, such as exhibiting the capacity to bear
PESTS AND PEST CONTROL

Most African agriculture takes place in tropical climates, on small landholdings with little access to machinery and agricultural chemicals. These conditions influence the type and severity of crop pest problems, constrain management options, and make pest control in sub-Saharan Africa distinct from pest control in industrialized, temperate regions. Farmers in tropical agroecosystems are challenged with a comparatively rich variety of major and minor pests; and the combination of warm temperatures and abundant rains during the growing seasons support many pest generations per year. However, subsistence farmers and small-scale growers with little access to costly farm inputs such as pesticides, herbicides, and synthetic fertilizers must place strategic importance on cultural practices, such as the selection of crop varieties resistant to pests and the use of crop mixtures, to reduce the impact of pests on particular crops.

Average yield losses due to insects attacking crops in the field have been estimated at 9 to 15 percent, with additional losses varying from 10 to 50 percent during storage, processing, and marketing. Targeted research on pests and pest management in Africa increased in the late twentieth century. It has become obvious that knowledge derived from studies in the temperate zone—usually on commercial varieties of industrial crops grown in mechanized, chemical-intensive, large, single-crop fields—has limited application to the majority of African growers, 80 to 90 percent of whom are involved in subsistence-crop production. Until the 1980s, research on African pests and pest control focused mainly on the 15 percent of agricultural enterprises devoted to industrial crops, such as coffee, tea, cotton, groundnuts, and tobacco. Technical knowledge is beginning to advance on pests attacking the major staples (cassava, maize, sorghum, millet, teff, and legumes) and minor food crops (such as sweet potato, plantains, and wheat), which comprise over 80 percent of the agriculture in African countries. Very little has been documented on the pests of the more than two thousand native grains, roots, fruits, and other food plants that are grown traditionally in different regions of Africa.

Common pests of African crops range widely in size, feeding habits, and mobility. Insect pests number in the thousands and include native and introduced species. Common pests native to the African continent range from the large migratory locusts to the minute, solitary bean flies. Migratory locusts are four to five centimeters long, have a single generation per year, periodically fly in swarms covering 100 to 1,000 square kilometers, with up to 50 million insects per square kilometer, and descend to devour almost all green parts of crops, shrubs, and trees. In contrast, bean flies measure two millimeters long, complete each generation in twenty to thirty days, and feed internally as stem-boring maggots only on plants in the bean family. Introduced species such as the greenbug aphid on cereals, the cassava mealybug, and the sorghum panicle bug were transported accidentally from other parts of the world. These introduced pests often multiply rapidly and cause devastating losses. Arriving in the early 1970s from South America, the newly established cassava mealybug threatened the major staple of over 200 million people across the African continent.

Insect pests attack every crop in every field in Africa, but vertebrate pests and weeds also cause substantial crop losses. Relatively few species of birds, notably those that form large feeding groups such as weaverbirds, cause crop destruction in the field. Weeds reduce crop yields through competition for light, nutrients, and moisture, with

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children, are interpreted as the product of an impersonal agency called *nuor-yin*, which Fortes translates as "evil prenatal destiny." Illnesses are more usually attributed to conflict between living persons or the result of failure to propitiate the ancestors. Other Tallensi spirits are related to healthy growth and development and to the quality of life in community and kinship group. With these elements taken together, Fortes describes a very elaborate cultural complex through which people interpret their life in society and their experience of one another, and through which they debate about the ultimate ends of existence and the means through which to achieve them.

The Tallensi view represents only the best-described example of a widespread and complex concept of the person that has not only been evoked by anthropologists and historians of religion but is the cultural framework for some of the most important African novels and stories, such as Wole Soyinka’s *The Interpreters*, Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road*, and Buchi Emecheta’s *Joys of Motherhood*. In the first of these examples, a novel of social change, all the main characters represent a different Yoruba power or *orisha*, and through this device Yoruba concepts of the person are connected to contemporary events. The protagonist of Ben Okri’s book is a child born of an evil prenatal destiny, and the novel tells the story of his adventures in a world in which he did not choose to live. Buchi Emecheta’s novel ends with the core of an Igbo (Ibo) person, her *chi*, afflicting her ungrateful children. Each of these novels is a major work of African fiction. They show in different west African social and cultural settings how west African ideas about personhood, agency, and fate are used to organize everyday experiences and provide an armature for products of the imagination ranging from popular culture and forms of religiosity to imaginative literature itself.

This discussion of concepts of the person has brought together bodies of Africanist literature that are normally kept separate. These include African philosophy, the anthropology and history of religion, studies of symbolism and ritual process, vernacular ideas about society and agency, and oral and written literature. In addition the vast literature on topics such as witchcraft and sorcery and spirit possession are relevant to discussions of African concepts of personhood. Witchcraft and sorcery beliefs are forms of moral discourse, exhibiting African ideas about the nature and use of power and about good and evil. It has often been noted that inversion characterizes the image of the witch, that witches seem to have attributes and practices that invert the most fundamental moral norms of society. This is the domain of culture that Thomas O. Beidelman calls the "moral imagination," in which people think through their most profound aspirations and fears. Ideas about the person or their negation are fundamental components of the shared imaginative life of peoples. In other spheres of social life, such as cults of spirit possession, aspects of personhood are suspended, negotiated, and even contested.

Iteso culture can provide another example. Women assume male attributes and powers in the cult of possession among the Iteso, and they set up spheres of social life that are exempt from male domination, at least when cult groups meet. Many of the problems that women say are caused by possession, such as the death and illness of children, are precisely those fundamental aspects of Tallensi personhood that Fortes described as the product of an evil prenatal destiny. In cults of possession, male interpretations of these problems are marginalized, as women assume male prerogatives and acquire the symbols of male power. We may say that the shifting definitions of gender and the person displayed in cults of possession are used to constitute epicenters of power, in terms of which women define the causes of their affliction and acquire means to deal with their difficulties in asserting all the attributes of the adult person. Cults of possession are a privileged arena in which the discrepancies between person and individual are articulated.

This example, like much of the literature on the concept of the person in Africa, shows the importance of relating work done within different disciplines and on seemingly different aspects of African life. Academic disciplines tend to fragment deleteriously the ways in which Africans conduct their lives, unless they use integrative points of view embodied in concepts like that of personhood.

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significant differences between the African models of the person, such as the Iteso have, and European models of personhood. First, the European model tends to be more metaphorical; it uses bodily experience as a metaphor for certain experiences, such as emotions, which are not thought of as being actually embodied, rather than define specific powers as an activity of the embodied person, as the Iteso model does. This is an instance that shows how the dualistic emphasis of European culture and cosmology shapes the use of the body as a model for experiencing the world, in contrast to more monistic African models.

Second, in the European view each person is customarily defined as separate from other persons. Hence, the powers and functions of the person are restricted to the single individual. Relationships between persons tend to be defined more in terms of the effect one person has on another rather than in terms of relationships among persons. In contrast, among the Iteso people many other peoples throughout Africa and the world, the body is not simply a container of powers and attributes set in a world with other bodies containing their own attributes and powers. For the Iteso the body is at most separated from other persons as the end points of relationships. The Iteso model of personhood recognizes both the effects of one person on another and the relationships that bind one to, or divide one from, another. This model operates in a large portion of Iteso ritual and ceremony, which is devoted to defining, creating, or maintaining relationships, “making paths,” among persons. The model of the person among the Iteso and in other African societies is not dualistic, nor are people seen as isolated from other persons. No people, African or otherwise, has been known to think about the person only in terms of effects or relationships. The contrast drawn here is one of emphasis and degree rather than an absolute one. Yet we may say that the Iteso and most other African concepts of personhood are relational rather than material, and that the boundaries of the body are defined as more permeable and less discrete in Africa than in many European settings.

A third difference between European and African concepts of the person such as those held by the Iteso has less to do with body image and personal experience than with ideas about action and agency, the ways in which actions are conceived and the judgments made about the person who undertakes or is affected by an action. One feature that people in both settings share is that they show a lively awareness of differences in character and disposition. The Iteso have a well-developed vocabulary that distinguishes various emotional states and dispositions, although shame plays a greater role than guilt in their attribution of emotions to themselves and others. Yet the reactions to and judgments people make about seemingly similar emotional states and motives can be very different. Early on, American children may learn the moralizing rhyme, “Sticks and stones can break my bones but names will never hurt me.” Later they learn that words can indeed hurt, but also that hurtful words can be rescinded and relationships often repaired. Many utterances among the Iteso operate in much the same way, but certain words are taken as clear and unambiguous indications of dispositions that cannot be altered. No Iteso person would hear the words “I could kill you for that” as an idle threat. Even the more innocuous sounding “We will see what happens” is taken as a serious and probably unrepairable breach of a relationship. As the Iteso people explain it, these words express homicidal intent. A person who would say such things has a heart so angry (“hot”) that nothing can alter that state. For the Iteso the disposition is permanent and not a transient state of affairs. A statement of homicidal intent is taken as an expressed desire that will be acted upon as soon as circumstances permit. Hence, even though Iteso recognize differences in character and disposition, they do not define emotional states and their relationship to actions as Europeans do. A similar contrast could be drawn between Iteso and European ideas about love and passion. The romantic concept that “being in love” overwhelms other cognitive and emotional capacities is not so prevalent in Iteso thinking about and judgments made of persons.

The fourth and final contrast to be drawn between the African example of the Iteso and European concepts of the person has to do with ideas about fate and destiny. In capitalist society the historical tendency has been increasingly for the fate of the person to be seen as a growth from within rather than an imposition from without. Fate is increasingly seen as a matter of personal responsibility and not the product of external, often extrahuman, even supernatural, forces. This development, termed “disenchantment” by Max Weber, is manifested in the individualism characteristic of social relations under capitalism and is connected to a world view that is often mechanistic and materialist in a reductionist sense.