Personality Symbolism in African Philosophy and Religion: The Symbol-Making and Symbol-Using Nature of Human Beings

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Abstract
Human beings are inherently symbol-making, and this symbolic capacity is central to African philosophical and religious thought. In African traditions, symbolism is not a mere aesthetic element but a foundational ontological structure through which identity, personhood, and communal belonging are understood. Symbols—manifested in names, rituals, proverbs, totems, and cosmologies—do not merely reflect reality but actively construct it. Personality, in this context, transcends individual psychology; it is a culturally embedded phenomenon shaped by spiritual, communal, and metaphysical dimensions. While much has been written on African symbolism and identity, the symbolic constitution of personality remains underexplored. This paper examines how symbols function in articulating personality within African thought, serving as mediums for ethical expression, metaphysical insight, and communal norms. Drawing on textual and oral traditions, it explores how symbolic forms mediate divine-human relations, encode moral expectations, and sustain social cohesion. The study argues that the African notion of the person is that of homo symbolism-a being whose existence is inseparable from symbolic representation. Amid globalization and cultural homogenization, the resilience of African symbolic systems underscores their importance. The paper concludes by calling for the revitalization of indigenous epistemologies through culturally responsive education, intergenerational knowledge transmission, and contextual theologies.
Keywords: African Philosophy, Homo-Symbolicus, Personality, Religion, Symbolism

Introduction

Human beings have long sought to understand themselves and their place in the universe through symbols. Across cultures and historical epochs, symbols have served as essential tools for expressing spiritual insights, philosophical ideas, moral values, and existential truths. In African philosophical and religious contexts, symbols transcend mere aesthetics or communicative convenience; they are embedded in the ontological and existential fabric of life. African thought—articulated through rituals, myths, proverbs, names, and cosmologies—reveals a

symbolic worldview where the visible and invisible are interwoven, and where being is mediated through culturally rooted signs (MBITI 1990; GYEKYE, 1995). A defining characteristic of African philosophy is its anthropocentric and communitarian orientation. The individual is conceived not as an isolated or autonomous agent, but as a being-in-relation—situated within networks of kinship, spirituality, ancestry, and the cosmos. In this metaphysical framework, personality is not simply a psychological or biological phenomenon but a symbolic reality—one that expresses ethical, spiritual, and cosmological dimensions. This holistic conception stands in contrast to many Western philosophical traditions that prioritize autonomy and rationality as the basis of identity (WIREDU 1980). In African societies, personal names, totems, ritual emblems, and titles function as symbolic expressions of one's identity, destiny, and communal belonging (AWOLALU & DOPAMU, 1979). These symbolic elements are not peripheral; they are constitutive of personhood.

Despite the centrality of symbolism in African life, the symbolic construction of personality remains underexplored in African philosophical and religious scholarship. African scholars have addressed symbolism in cosmology, ethics, and ritual, but few have explicitly interrogated how symbols constitute and express the nature of the person. In contrast, Western thinkers have developed more elaborate frameworks for analysing the symbolic basis of human existence. For instance, Cassirer (1944) famously defines the human being as *animal symbolicum*, emphasizing the foundational role of symbols in human consciousness. Susanne Langer (1942) extends Cassirer's work by incorporating aesthetic and emotional dimensions into the philosophy of symbols. While Cassirer foregrounds the cognitive function of symbolic forms, Langer introduces the concept of "presentational symbols," which convey meaning beyond the capacity of discursive language. She argues that such symbolic forms—art, myth, music—are not subordinate to rational discourse but are essential to the human interpretation of reality.

Classical philosophy also demonstrates symbolic thinking. Plato (2006) illustrates the symbolic nature of perception and enlightenment, while Aristotle (1996), Kant (1998), and Jung (1964) explore symbolism's ethical, cognitive, and archetypal aspects. Lévi-Strauss (1954) introduces a structuralist view, revealing how myths reflect binary oppositions—like raw/cooked or life/death—underlying human cognition. Kenneth Burke (1966), in his dramatistic theory, highlights language as symbolic action and offers the pentad (act, scene, agent, agency, purpose) as a lens for understanding rituals and narratives.

Yet, these symbolic frameworks often rest on Eurocentric assumptions. African intellectuals have responded with critical recontextualizations. Soyinka (1976) contests the dismissal of African myths as primitive, emphasizing their ontological and ethical depth—especially through figures like Ogun. Mudimbe (1988) critiques colonial epistemologies and calls for a decolonized study of African symbolic systems. Thompson (1983) traces symbolic continuities across African and Afro-Atlantic art forms. Other thinkers—Mbiti (1990), Nkrumah (1964), Diop (1974), Tshaka (2009)—have addressed naming, ritual, communal memory, and cultural symbolism. While these contributions are invaluable, a systematic philosophical account of the symbolic constitution of personhood is still needed.

This gap is especially urgent today. Globalization, urbanization, and the rise of individualistic ideologies threaten traditional African structures of identity. In Ogoni society, for instance, naming systems, ritual symbols, and chieftaincy emblems—once potent markers of personhood—are being reinterpreted or eroded. Such shifts suggest a symbolic crisis in the articulation of identity. This raises crucial questions: How do symbols define and sustain African conceptions of personhood? What happens when these symbols lose their potency or meaning? And how can they be revitalized in modern contexts?

This paper steers to its objectives through the following subheadings: it begins by outlining the research method, grounded in both textual sources and oral tradition, to capture the depth of African philosophical thought. It then explores the African perception of personality as a holistic and communal reality rather than an individualistic construct. The human being is examined as *homo symbolicus*, a symbol-making creature, particularly within African thought; symbolic constructions of identity are analyzed through names and personhood, totems and clan identity, oral traditions and symbolic narratives, and language as a vehicle and symbol of self-identification and cultural belonging. The paper then considers agency and symbolic forms of personhood through initiation rites as formative experiences, the role of ancestors as symbolic extensions of the self, and the spiritual and mystical dimensions that transcend the material aspects of existence. It further discusses spiritual representation and the sacred self as essential to African metaphysics, followed by a reflection on moral symbolism as an expression of the ethical dimension of personality. Finally, the conclusion synthesizes these themes, affirming that African conceptions of personhood are richly symbolic, communal, and spiritually grounded.

Research Method

This study employs Qualitative Textual Analysis as its primary methodological approach for data collection and interpretation. As Khan (2023) explains, textual analysis involves the meticulous and critical examination of written, spoken, or visual communications to uncover underlying themes, meanings, and symbols, thereby revealing the intentions, perspectives, and ideological positions of the authors. Rather than relying on mere description, this method delves into the hidden structures and intricate relationships embedded within texts, requiring an in-depth engagement with their social, historical, and political contexts. McKee (2003) further emphasizes that qualitative textual analysis draws upon various interpretive variables, including creativity, originality, cultural history, and the civilizational context of both the subject and the researcher. Arya (2020) supports this approach, noting its strength in generating diverse interpretations and encouraging researchers to explore the multifaceted dimensions of a text, thus enriching cultural inquiry. In adopting this method, the authors underscore that personality symbolism in African religion and philosophy not only transcends Western paradigms but also affirms the deeply symbolic and meaning-making nature of African worldviews.

The African Perception of Personality

In African philosophy, personhood transcends biological determinism, emerging instead as a dynamic process grounded in communal recognition and moral

development. This perspective is exemplified in Deezia's (2023) *ziibalogzii* philosophy, which emphasizes interconnectedness, communalism, and shared humanity. Rooted in the cultural and spiritual life of the Ogoni people of Nigeria, *ziibalogzii*—literally meaning "the condition of being human"—articulates an ontology in which individual identity is constituted relationally through mutual interdependence and ethical participation in communal life (DEEZIA 2023). Ogoni idioms such as *doo-i-tor* ("live and let live"), *bue nee kum-zoo* ("individuals make up the community"), and *bae gbo kpena loo, ba kpo kpue* ("hunting wild animals requires collective effort") reflect this relational construction of the self, suggesting that identity is not autonomous but co-constituted within a network of social and spiritual relations.

This communalist view of personhood aligns with Mbiti's (1990) renowned dictum: "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am." Within this framework, personhood is not innate but achieved through communal involvement and ethical conduct. The individual is a moral agent whose humanity is validated through social obligations rather than inherent traits. Mbiti's formulation, further enriched by Ubuntu philosophy, provides the moral and metaphysical foundation of African social life, where becoming a person is both an existential and communal endeavor. Moreover, African cosmologies conceptualize personality as a synthesis of physical, spiritual, and ancestral dimensions. In Ogoni thought, for instance, the human being comprises the body (*nam-loo*, spirit (ador), and ancestral link (piogi) (DEEZIA 2020). Similarly, Akan anthropology includes the *okra* (soul), *sunsum* (spirit), and physical form (GYEKYE 1995), while Igbo traditions recognize the influence of ancestral forces (*ndi ichie*) in shaping personality and destiny. These holistic models contrast sharply with Western psychological frameworks such as the Big Five (MCCRAE & COSTA, 1997), offering instead a metaphysical and relational approach to identity.

Crucially, moral development occupies a central place in African conceptions of personality. Among the Yoruba, the ideal person—*omolubi*—is defined by virtues such as humility, integrity, and communal service (FAYEMI 2009). Among the Igbo, moral behavior is guided by omenala (custom) and *nso ani or nso ala* (taboo), which establish ethical boundaries and preserve social harmony (NWOYE 2011). These cultural frameworks underscore personality as a moral construct, cultivated through engagement with communal values and spiritual obligations. Rites of passage further ritualize the development of personhood. Life stages such as birth, initiation, marriage, and death are marked by culturally significant ceremonies that signify moral and social integration. Among the Ibibio, for instance, circumcision into the Ekong masquerade society denotes the transition to adulthood and communal responsibility (DEEZIA 2023). Similarly, Igbo ceremonies such as *iri ji* (New Yam Festival) and *igba nkwu* (traditional marriage) serve not merely as social gatherings but as ethical performances that reinforce identity and belonging.

This communitarian model has been rigorously defended by Menkiti (1984), who argues that personhood in African thought is acquired, not assumed. According to Menkiti, children are regarded as potential persons who attain full personhood through communal affirmation and moral maturation. However, this graded view has attracted criticism for its potential exclusion of infants, non-

conformists, and persons with disabilities. Wiredu (1992) offers a counterpoint, advocating a more inclusive model that upholds both communal identity and individual dignity. In a similar vein, Gyekye (1997) proposes a moderate communitarianism that balances moral agency with intrinsic human worth.

Furthermore, African metaphysical perspectives—particularly the notion of 'vital force' and the continuity of life—contribute to a spiritually enriched understanding of personhood (IDOWU 1973; TEMPELS 1959). Within this framework, the individual is situated in a relational cosmos where personhood is both an ethical pursuit and a metaphysical accomplishment. As African philosophers increasingly adopt analytical approaches (HALLEN 2009; OLADIPO 2006), these indigenous perspectives continue to contribute meaningfully to global discourses on identity, dignity, and the human condition. In sum, the African conception of personhood offers a profound and multifaceted vision of humanity—one that locates the self not in isolation, but within a dynamic network of community, ancestry, and cosmos. Whether construed as a moral status to be attained or an inherent condition to be affirmed, personhood in African philosophy remains deeply relational, ethically anchored, and spiritually holistic.

The Human as *Homo symbolicus* in African Thought

The concept of *homo symbolicus* captures the philosophical understanding that humans construct and communicate meaning through symbols. In African thought, the human being is conceived as inherently symbolic—a being whose existence is shaped, defined, and guided by symbols that infuse life with meaning. This aligns with the idea that humans are not merely rational or biological entities but fundamentally symbol-making and symbol-using creatures. Within African epistemology and ontology, symbols serve as vehicles for transmitting knowledge, constructing communal identity, and facilitating spiritual engagement. Individuals do not passively encounter symbols; rather, they actively interpret, embody, and reconstruct them as part of their lived reality.

In African traditions, symbols are not arbitrary but are imbued with profound metaphysical and existential significance. African religious systems, for instance, operate through intricate networks of symbolic representation. Among the Igbo, the *ofo* staff functions as a sacred emblem of justice, moral integrity, and divine authority. Possessing the *ofo* signifies not only leadership but also an ethical responsibility to uphold justice (EJIZU 2017). Thus, symbols encapsulate ethical, spiritual, and social dimensions of being.

Moreover, the human being in African thought is also a ritualistic being. Rituals function as symbolic acts that mediate the relationship between the spiritual and material realms. Turner (1967) describes ritual symbols as multivocal—carrying layered meanings that foster both social cohesion and individual transformation. Rites of passage, such as the Yaa initiation among the Ogoni, mark life transitions while reinforcing communal values and social obligations.

Language, as a primary symbolic system, plays a central role in shaping African worldviews. Proverbs, idioms, and riddles are not mere linguistic ornamentation; they encapsulate philosophical insights and ethical norms. For example, the Ogoni proverb *nwi kpoa ka naa leloo, beee nornu aa-ee* ("One who is not taught by their mother will be taught by the world") highlights the symbolic

significance of moral education. The performative nature of language in African cultures shows that words possess ontological power, capable of shaping reality.

Symbolism also pervades African art and aesthetics. Masks, carvings, and textiles are not merely decorative but encode historical, spiritual, and philosophical meanings. The Benin bronzes document royal lineage and divine authority (EZRA 1992), while Akan *adinkra* symbols like *eban* (security) and *duafe* (cleanliness) articulate moral and social values. Similarly, African conceptions of personhood underscore the symbolic. The Igbo notion of *mmadu* reflects a relational ontology, where personhood entails the fulfillment of moral and communal obligations.

Even the African perception of time and space carries symbolic weight. Unlike the linear Western model, African temporality is cyclical, expressed through festivals, ancestral rites, and rhythmic music and dance. This symbolic consciousness persists in modern contexts. Contemporary African literature, music, and digital media continue to employ indigenous symbols to critique colonial legacies and express postcolonial identities. Writers such as Koleka Putuma (2017)—whose poetry interweaves water, memory, and political symbolism in post-apartheid South Africa—and scholars like Niyi Akingbe (2023), who explores "claimed" and "unclaimed" sacred spaces in Nigerian poetry as metaphors for mythic geography and spiritual time, articulate cultural continuity and transformation through symbolic temporality. In digital spaces, the transmission of oral motifs and metaphysical landscapes attests to the evolving nature of African symbolic thought in the 21st century.

Symbolic Constructions of Identity

Names and Personhood

In African cultures, names are far more than identifiers—they are profound markers of identity, laden with historical, spiritual, and ethical significance. Unlike many Western naming traditions, African names encapsulate communal values, ancestral lineage, and individual destiny. Naming is a sacred act, often performed through elaborate rituals that affirm the individual's connection to the past, present, and future.

Names in African societies are embedded in religious and philosophical worldviews. They often serve as spiritual conduits, linking individuals to ancestors or deities. Among the Ogoni of Nigeria, names such as *Nwidae-Asira* ("Father has risen") and *Nwinae-Alua* ("Mother has returned") express beliefs in reincarnation. Similarly, names like *Deezia, Deebom, and Deekor*, tied to days in the Ogoni calendar, connect individuals to cosmological forces and guide ethical behaviour.

Naming also serves commemorative and aspirational functions. Among the Igbo, names such as *Chukwuemeka* ("God has done something great") or *Nkiruka* ("The future is greater") reflect gratitude or hope, preserving collective memory and cultural consciousness. Ethical values are encoded in names, shaping moral identity. Among the Shona of Zimbabwe, for example, names like *Tendai* ("Be thankful") and *Ruramiso*("Set things right") promote virtues such as gratitude and justice (MAZRUI 1986).

Names further function as socio-political tools. Leaders and warriors may be given names denoting authority or divine favour, thus shaping historical narratives and inspiring social ideals. Among the Yoruba, names like Ayodele

("Joy has come home") and *Ifedayo* ("Love has become joy") reflect emotional and ethical aspirations. However, these names can also impose communal expectations, potentially limiting personal freedom when individuals struggle to embody their assigned identities. Thus, in African thought, naming is not merely descriptive but constitutive—a moral, spiritual, and social act that forges identity and sustains communal ethos.

Totems and Clan Identity

Totemic symbols play a vital role in shaping both personal and communal identity in many African societies. These symbols—often animals, plants, or objects—serve as spiritual emblems representing a lineage or clan. Totems are not mere symbols; they embody the life force and spiritual essence of the people, linking them to their ancestors, nature, and the divine. This system reinforces a shared cultural heritage and collective consciousness.

Totems function as markers of kinship and ancestry, fostering a deep sense of belonging. They are frequently tied to mythological origin stories passed down through generations, which explain how a particular symbol became emblematic of the group. These narratives reinforce moral codes and societal norms, shaping behaviour and guiding community values (MBITI 1990). Thus, totems serve not only as identity markers but also as ethical frameworks.

A central feature of totemism is the taboo against harming or consuming the totemic animal or object. Such prohibitions reinforce communal solidarity and reverence for the qualities associated with the totem. For example, a clan identified with the lion may value courage and leadership, while one linked to the tortoise may emphasize patience and wisdom. By internalizing these attributes, individuals uphold ancestral legacies and maintain cultural continuity.

Totemic systems also serve as mechanisms for conflict resolution and social regulation. Inter-clan relationships are often structured by totemic affiliations, which can prevent disputes and foster peaceful coexistence. In cases of conflict, elders may invoke the sanctity of the shared totem to mediate and restore harmony. This practice nurtures unity and strengthens interdependence among groups.

Spiritually, totems are viewed as sacred intermediaries between the human and spiritual realms. Rituals, sacrifices, and ceremonies are conducted in their honour to seek protection, guidance, and blessings, reinforcing the community's connection to the divine and offering stability in times of uncertainty. Artistic and literary expressions—such as carvings, textiles, proverbs, and folktales—further preserve and transmit totemic symbolism. These cultural artifacts serve as visible and narrative reminders of collective identity, embedded within everyday life and communal spaces.

However, modern forces such as globalization, urbanization, and digital media increasingly threaten the symbolic integrity of totems. As traditional meanings are diluted or commercialized, there is a growing need to critically engage with and preserve these cultural symbols for future generations.

Masks and Ritual Representations of the Self

In African religious and philosophical traditions, masks transcend aesthetic function; they serve as mediators between the visible and invisible realms.

Through their performance, individuals assume sacred or ancestral identities, transcending personal limitations to embody spiritual forces (DEEZIA 2024). The symbolic construction and ritual enactment of masks form a central dimension of African ontology, where the self is not a fixed, autonomous entity but an evolving identity shaped by communal, spiritual, and ancestral interrelations.

The creation of masks carries deep symbolic significance. Intricate carvings, colours, and materials are not arbitrary; each element conveys spiritual, social, or moral meaning. Mask-making is often accompanied by ritual invocations, as the mask is not merely an object but a vessel of divine presence. Craftsmen, regarded as spiritual intermediaries, draw from ancestral wisdom and metaphysical principles to shape these sacred artifacts. Their work enables wearers to engage in transformative experiences, linking material and spiritual realities.

The performance of masks in religious and communal rituals enacts African metaphysical concepts. During ceremonies, the mask wearer surrenders individual identity, becoming the embodiment of a spirit or deity. Rather than concealing the self, the mask reveals it in its most essential relationship to the sacred and the collective (FAVARO 2018). This ritual transformation affirms the African philosophical notion of interconnectedness among the living, the ancestors, and the yet-to-be-born. Such ceremonies create liminal spaces where ancestral spirits are invoked, moral values are reinforced, and communal unity is reasserted. The masked figure becomes a conduit for divine communication, transmitting ethical norms and social guidance.

The use of masks also illustrates the fluidity of selfhood in African thought. In contrast to Western philosophical models that emphasize individual autonomy, African perspectives understand identity as relational and dynamic. Wearing a mask allows one to explore alternative modes of being, revealing insights into personal and communal experiences, spiritual realities, and existential challenges.

In initiation rites, masks play a crucial role in shaping identity and reinforcing cultural continuity. These rites, marking transitions such as from childhood to adulthood, involve masked performances that convey ancestral authority and sacred knowledge. Through dance, music, and symbolic drama, initiates undergo psychological and spiritual transformation, emerging as morally and socially integrated individuals. Here, masks function as repositories of ancestral wisdom and transmitters of moral values across generations.

Moreover, masks serve as instruments of resistance and empowerment. In Ogoni communities, for instance, masks have historically been employed in times of social or political crisis as symbols of unity and resilience. Even in contemporary settings, masks are used to critique injustice, assert cultural identity, and engage with evolving socio-political realities.

Thus, the symbolic and ritual uses of masks in African traditions underscore the depth of African epistemology and ontology. Masks are not mere ornaments; they are embodiments of ancestral presence, vehicles of sacred wisdom, and instruments of spiritual and social transformation. However, in modern contexts, masks face challenges such as commodification, ritual decontextualization, and reinterpretation through globalized frameworks. These tensions invite critical reflection on the evolving meanings of African identity amid the pressures of tradition and modernity.

Oral Traditions and Symbolic Narratives

Oral traditions—including proverbs, folktales, and praise poetry—are central to identity formation and cultural transmission in Africa. They reinforce communal memory, encode moral values, and preserve historical consciousness. Among the Ogoni of Southern Nigeria, *pya-taa* (evil spirit stories) serve both to instil social norms and to commemorate heroic legacies. Similarly, oral traditions often function as tools of resistance, exemplified by apartheid-era protest songs in South Africa. Through symbolism and performance, these traditions sustain indigenous knowledge systems and strengthen communal cohesion.

The symbolic nature of oral traditions reflects an interplay of language, meaning, and performance. Proverbs, for instance, distill philosophical insights and communal wisdom. The Yoruba adage, *a ka gbo a ka to, a fi digbolugi* ("We listen, we reflect, and we become wise"), affirms the importance of contemplation. The Ogoni proverb *torn e danu naa bee kuika bee pegere* ("The ear that will hear does not need to be as big as a hat") emphasizes that wisdom lies in attentiveness and openness, not in physical attributes. Such expressions encapsulate behavioural norms and guide interpersonal conduct.

Folktales also encode cultural values through allegory and metaphor. The *Akan Anansi* stories highlight wit and survival through the trickster figure of the spider. Among the Ogoni, tales of *kuru* (the tortoise) warn against greed and deceit, reinforcing ethical conduct. These narratives foster moral education, communal identity, and generational continuity.

Beyond morality, oral traditions preserve ecological, medicinal, and spiritual knowledge. Ogoni oral cosmologies articulate the origins of the universe and reflect astronomical knowledge predating Western science. Storytelling encodes practical survival strategies—such as locating water sources or reading animal tracks—ensuring the transmission of vital knowledge. Thus, oral traditions remain dynamic repositories of cultural resilience and epistemological continuity.

Language as a Symbol of Identity

Language plays a fundamental role in shaping African identity, serving not only as a means of communication but also as a vessel of history, worldview, and cultural values. Indigenous languages are vital markers of ethnic identity, whereas colonial languages—such as English, French, and Portuguese—reflect the enduring legacies of imperialism and hybridity in post-colonial contexts (WA THIONG'O 1986). Code-switching among multilingual Africans exemplifies the fluid nature of identity in these societies, where language use is context-dependent and culturally nuanced.

In African traditions, language transcends utilitarian communication; it is the medium through which values, traditions, and collective memory are transmitted. Proverbs, idioms, and oral narratives encoded in native tongues embody community wisdom and ethical principles. Thus, the decline of indigenous languages signals not just linguistic loss but also the erosion of cultural identity and indigenous knowledge systems.

Colonialism entrenched a linguistic hierarchy that privileged European languages in education, governance, and administration, relegating indigenous languages to informal domains. This has led to a cultural dissonance wherein

fluency in colonial languages is associated with modernity and socio-economic advancement, while native languages are perceived as obsolete. Wa Thiong'o (1986) argues that reclaiming indigenous languages is essential to decolonizing the African mind, as language carries the memory and consciousness of a people.

Multilingualism remains a hallmark of African societies. The practice of code-switching—shifting between languages in a single conversation—is a strategic expression of identity and adaptability. In urban centres, hybrid languages such as Pidgin English, Sheng, and Camfranglais have emerged, reflecting evolving identities that transcend ethnic lines. However, this linguistic hybridity raises concerns about the marginalization of traditional languages and the sustainability of cultural heritage, highlighting the tension between innovation and preservation in African linguistic landscapes.

Agency and Symbolic Forms of Personhood

In African thought, agency is deeply connected to one's symbolic identity. A person does not act in isolation but operates within a network of social, spiritual, and ancestral relationships. Agency is exercised through symbolic acts such as initiation rites, libations, and sacrifices, which affirm one's role within the moral and metaphysical order.

Initiation Rites and the Making of the Person

Initiation rites serve as symbolic transitions from one stage of life to another, marking the individual's transformation into a fully recognized member of the community. As Lebese et al. (2022) observe, rites of passage are ceremonies practiced by various cultural groups, particularly indigenous African societies, to mark significant life changes such as birth, puberty, and adulthood. These rituals often include symbolic death and rebirth, underscoring the belief that personhood is cultivated through experience and community validation. Among the Ibibio, the 'Ekong' initiation rite—embodied through the Ekong masquerade—guides individuals through a structured process of holistic development. As Deezia (2023) noted, this rite fosters cultural learning and instill a sense of responsibility and purpose in individuals, reinforcing communal values. Such traditions highlight that personal agency is not merely innate but is socially conferred and affirmed within cultural frameworks. However, in modern contexts, some initiation rites have faced criticism for perpetuating outdated gender roles or for practices considered harmful, thus sparking debates about their place in contemporary society.

Ancestors as Symbolic Extensions of the Self

African traditions view ancestors as active participants in the moral and spiritual lives of the living. According to Gyekye (1996), the veneration of ancestors is fundamental to the socio-religious fabric of sub-Saharan African communities. Ancestors, seen as the spirits of deceased elders residing in a realm akin to the living, continue to shape identity and moral agency. Rituals such as libations and

sacrifices symbolically maintain the link between the living and the dead. In Ogoni cosmology, the *Namate* are revered as guardians of familial and communal ethics, invoked during crises and celebrations. However, the influence of Christianity, secular education, and urbanization increasingly challenges these traditional practices, prompting a re-evaluation of the role of ancestors in contemporary African spirituality.

The Spiritual and Mystical Dimension of Personhood

Personhood in many African traditions is shaped by the spiritual and mystical realm. Beliefs in layered existence, such as the Igbo concept of *Chi*, or the Ogoni *gborsi*, or the Akan *Kra*, suggest that destiny is both preordained and responsive to human and divine influence (OBIOHA 2020; DEEZIA 2020). Obioha argues that the Igbo understanding of authentic personhood offers a richer framework than some Western models and may help address modern social challenges if thoughtfully applied. The belief in guardian spirits, personal deities, and reincarnation emphasizes a continuity that transcends physical life. The roles of diviners and spiritual practitioners further highlight the interconnectedness of the human and supernatural realms, granting personhood a sacred dimension. However, integrating these traditional views into modern governance and social policy requires careful negotiation to respect pluralism and individual rights.

Spiritual Representation and the Sacred Self

The African worldview is fundamentally spiritual, where the sacred and the secular are seamlessly integrated into daily life. Spiritual representation is expressed through body markings, sacred objects, and rituals that reinforce both personal and communal identity. The sacred self is perceived as an extension of the divine within the individual, manifesting through cultural practices that connect one to ancestors, deities, and the cosmic order.

In many African societies, body markings such as scarification and tattooing serve as sacred symbols of identity, social status, and spiritual protection. Among the Yoruba, for instance, scarification is believed to inscribe spiritual resilience and establish a connection with ancestral lineage and divine forces (ADEBOYE 2002). Such practices reinforce the notion that the body is a vessel bearing inscriptions of sacred significance.

Sacred objects—including amulets, talismans, and ritual artifacts—function as channels of divine energy, providing spiritual protection and affirming the sacred self. Rituals further embody this sacred self, creating spaces for communion with spiritual entities. Initiations, libations, and masquerade performances, such as the Nwaotam of the Niger Delta, manifest ancestral presence and reaffirm communal identity and ethical values.

The sacred self is not an isolated entity but one deeply embedded in communal and cosmological relationships. The Ogoni concept of *Ziibalogzii* illustrates this relational ontology, where personhood is affirmed through interaction with others (DEEZIA 2023). Spiritual identity is nurtured through communal participation, moral responsibilities, and ritual engagement.

This African perspective challenges Western dichotomies between the material and spiritual. In African thought, the sacred is immanent—manifest in rivers, mountains, and trees, regarded as abodes of spirits. Thus, the sacred self

transcends the individual, encompassing one's relationship with nature, the divine, and the wider community.

Moral Symbolism and the Ethical Dimension of Personality

African religious traditions often use symbolic narratives to convey moral principles and shape personal character. Proverbs, folktales, and myths serve as didactic tools that instil virtues such as honesty, humility, and communal responsibility. For example, among the Akan people, the proverb *"Obi nnim a, obi kyere"* ("If one does not know, another teaches") emphasizes communal learning and ethical formation (GYEKYE 1996). The transmission of moral values through symbols ensures that personality development aligns with the ethical and spiritual ideals of the community.

Furthermore, African cosmology integrates spiritual symbols into ethical life. The concept of *akoor-popor* among the Ogoni, referring to children believed to have a cyclical return between the spirit and human worlds, carries symbolic lessons about resilience and the search for meaning in human suffering. This symbolic representation of personality underscores the dynamic relationship between the spiritual and moral dimensions of human existence.

Some scholars might argue that the African communitarian model of personhood, which thinkers like Menkiti support, could leave some people out, especially babies, people with disabilities, or people who don't fit in, by treating them as "potential" or "less than full" people until they meet certain communal or moral standards. Some people may say that this position goes against the idea of intrinsic human dignity, which is a key part of many international human rights frameworks. In response, it's crucial to point out that later African philosophers like Gyekye (1997) and Wiredu (1992) have suggested moderate communitarianism, which supports both belonging to a community and having value as a person. This kind of thinking understands that while personhood is socially enriched and ethically cultivated, the basic dignity of all people is not up for debate. This makes sure that vulnerable groups are not left out of full moral consideration.

A second problem is that personhood is defined in terms of spiritual and ancestral elements. Critics who don't believe in God or the afterlife might say that basing identity on metaphysical things like vital force, Chi, or ancestral spirits is not based on facts and is not appropriate for societies that are diverse or secular. The answer here is that African philosophy does not require everyone to believe the same thing literally; it focusses on the moral and symbolic worth of these ideas instead. Even in non-religious interpretations, the ideas of ancestry, spiritual guardianship, and destiny can be seen as strategies to affirm moral culpability, historical continuity, and intergenerational duty. So, these ideas can be used in non-religious settings without losing their moral foundation.

A further argument could be that powerful symbolic and ceremonial frameworks, such initiation ceremonies or totemic prohibitions, could limit people's freedom, especially if they enforce strict gender roles or discourage dissent. People are worried that symbolic identification could be used to control people instead of giving them power. In response, one could argue that African symbolic traditions are always changing, not staying the same. Communities have

changed rituals, reinterpreted totems, and reused masks to deal with modern moral and political issues, as history illustrates. The same symbolic structures that used to support hierarchical standards are now being utilized for opposition, reform, and cultural regeneration. This flexibility means that the symbolic roots of African personhood can live side by side with changing ideas of freedom and equality.

Conclusion

The human person in African philosophy and religion is fundamentally *homo symbolicus*, engaged in a life shaped by symbols that define identity, morality, and spirituality. In other words, personality symbolism in African philosophy and religion reveals the deep interconnection between human identity, culture, and the symbolic world. The African worldview embraces symbols as vital expressions of personal and communal existence, where the individual is not just a biological entity but also a bearer of meaning shaped by cultural symbols. Human beings, as symbol-making and symbol-using creatures, engage in the continuous creation and interpretation of symbols that define their relationships with the divine, the ancestors, and the social order.

Through personal symbols—such as names, totems, masks, and ritualistic insignia—Africans encode values, beliefs, and existential realities that reflect the complexities of life. These symbols serve as bridges between the material and the spiritual, embodying the essence of personhood in ways that transcend mere physical existence. Whether expressed through artistic representations, religious rites, or philosophical discourse, personality symbolism reinforces the collective memory of a people, preserving identity and continuity across generations.

In this framework, the self is not an isolated entity but a relational being whose essence is understood through the symbols that mediate existence. The concept of personhood is thus a dynamic interplay between the individual and the community, the seen and the unseen, the temporal and the transcendent. By engaging with symbols, African societies affirm their philosophical and religious convictions, ensuring that the individual remains embedded in a network of meaning that sustains both personal and communal life.

Declaration

*The authors declare no conflict of interest or ethical issues for this work.

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