

The Two Menkitis: A Developmental Reading of Personhood and the Case for Impartial Communitarianism

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Abstract

Kwame Gyekye's charge that Ifeanyi Menkiti's account of personhood is a radical communitarianism that subordinates the individual to the group has framed a long debate in African philosophy. This article argues that the later iterations of the debate ignored a development in its central text: the 1984 essay subordinates rights to duties and the individual to the community, giving Gyekye's label its purchase; the 2004 restatement abandons that ranking, foregrounding the individual's standing and worth, and Menkiti's late writings confirm the direction of the change. Read developmentally, the mature Menkiti converges with Gyekye's moderate communitarianism, and the radical/moderate dichotomy ceases to mark a real difference between them. The article names the converged position impartial communitarianism and specifies the conditions that make communal deliberation legitimate: inclusion, answerability to reciprocal recognition, and reversibility. It confronts the hardest cases, female genital cutting, virginity testing, and child marriage, conceding that reform has largely come through external constitutional means. The contribution is interpretive, dissolving the disagreement the dichotomy was thought to mark.

Keywords: Menkiti, Gyekye, impartial communitarianism, personhood, individual rights, African philosophy

Introduction

Ifeanyi Menkiti's short essay on person and community is widely treated as the *locus classicus* of the normative conception of personhood in African philosophy; introducing the field, Kwasi Wiredu names it as such and reports himself in substantial agreement with it (MENKITI 1984; WIREDU 2004). This conception holds that personhood is not given at birth but achieved through the progressive fulfilment of one's place within a web of communal relationships, so that the community holds a kind of priority over the individual. Kwame Gyekye objected that the resulting view, which he labelled radical communitarianism, leaves the individual insufficiently protected, and proposed instead a moderate communitarianism (GYEKYE 1992) that accords the individual and the community equal moral standing (GYEKYE 1997).

Much of the subsequent literature treats Menkiti's position as a fixed target, to be defended or attacked as it stands. The central claim of this article is that the target moved: Menkiti stated his view twice, two decades apart, and the two statements differ in exactly the respect the debate turns on. The 1984 essay

closes by subordinating rights to duties and the individual to the community; the 2004 restatement does not. Once this is seen, the dispute looks different: Gyekye's critique fastens on the 1984 formulation, but Menkiti's later formulation has already moved toward the position Gyekye recommends, and the radical/moderate contrast no longer names a real disagreement.

My aims are interpretive and, in a modest sense, historical. I do not propose a new normative principle, and I do not claim that African societies have in fact always honoured individual rights; that claim is neither defensible nor needed. I claim that the later iterations of the debate (MATOLINO 2009; MOLEFE 2017; IKUENOBE 2018) have been mis-posed because they ignored a development in its central text. The argument first establishes the developmental reading and the convergence it produces, then states the resulting position and its conditions of legitimate deliberation, then confronts, as its decisive test, the cases in which communal authority has harmed individuals, and finally sets out the interpretive method.

The Menkiti–Gyekye Debate and Its Critics

Gyekye's critique has organised the secondary literature, but the criticism of that critique points, from two opposite directions, to a single conclusion my argument exploits. A first line holds that Gyekye's moderate communitarianism is less distinct from the radical view than he claims. Bernard Matolino (2009) argues that Gyekye, having faulted radical communitarianism for subordinating the individual, then concedes that communal goods may take precedence over rights, reproducing the prioritisation he set out to reject, a charge his book-length treatment hardens (MATOLINO 2014). By 2018 Matolino pronounces the debate "exhaustive and exhausted" (MATOLINO 2018, 101) and urges attention to its political implications instead; the developmental reading is a reply to that verdict, for the debate could seem exhausted only while both sides classified a static text. Famakinwa (2010) presses the same worry by asking how moderate Gyekye's moderate communitarianism really is, and Ansah and Mensah (2018) develop it at length, contending that the moderate position is a radical communitarianism in disguise. Chimakonam and Nweke reach a kindred verdict from the side of rights: neither thinker secures inalienable rights, since what Gyekye calls rights are entitlements the community may justifiably withdraw, so the two positions do not differ fundamentally (CHIMAKONAM and NWEKE 2018).

A second line runs the other way. Polycarp Ikuenobe (2018) argues that Gyekye and Matolino misread Menkiti at a specific point: they take his claim that the community defines the person as a subordination of the individual's moral standing, when it is an account of how personhood is constituted that leaves that standing intact. Oritsegbubemi Oyowe, drawing on Searle's social ontology, likewise defends Menkiti against both critics, arguing that Gyekye's and Matolino's objections either miss the core of his strategy or presuppose an essentialism Menkiti does not share, so that his account of persons as social entities stands (OYOWE 2022). The present claim is distinct and complementary: where Ikuenobe holds that a static Menkiti was misread, I argue that the text itself

moved, so the later Menkiti needs no rescue by reinterpretation. Motsamai Molefe, across several works, anchors Afro-communitarianism in the normative idea of personhood and a morality of duties to all, giving rights a genuine but subordinate place rather than treating them as the primary route to dignity (MOLEFE 2017; 2018). His defence is instructive here: it shows that a communitarian can accord rights real standing while denying them lexical¹ primacy, the structural position the mature Menkiti is here read as reaching. Dismas Masolo (2010) cautions against treating communitarianism as a single homogeneous doctrine and distinguishes more than one form of it.

These criticisms pull in opposite directions, yet converge on one lesson: whether Gyekye's moderate view collapses toward the radical, or the interpreters have misread Menkiti, or communitarianism is not one thing, the radical/moderate dichotomy is unstable. I do not adjudicate the collapse thesis; I take the criticisms only as evidence that the dichotomy has become an unreliable instrument of classification. The fruitful response is not to relocate Menkiti within it but to read him carefully across his own writings, which the next three sections do.

Menkiti in 1984: The Strong Formulation

Menkiti's 1984 essay makes an ontological claim before a political one: to be a person is to occupy and sustain a standing conferred and confirmed through communal life, not to possess a property each human being has independently of others. He states the priority at the outset: "the reality of the communal world takes precedence over the reality of individual life histories" (MENKITI 1984, 171), and draws the constitutive conclusion in its most quoted sentence: "in the African view it is the community which defines the person as person, not some isolated static quality of rationality, will, or memory" (MENKITI 1984, 172). Personhood so understood is achieved, admits of degrees, and is something at which one may fail. So far this is an account of how persons are constituted, carrying no verdict on how conflicts between individual and community are settled.

But the essay's closing pages move from the constitution of persons to the ordering of claims, and the move is explicit: "In the African understanding, priority is given to the duties which individuals owe to the collectivity, and their rights, whatever these may be, are seen as secondary to their exercise of their duties" (MENKITI 1984, 180). He fixes the point in a diagram that moves from society to individuals, asserting what he calls "an ontological independence" to human society (MENKITI 1984, 180). This is no longer a neutral account of personhood but a ranking: duty before right, community before individual. It gives Gyekye's charge its textual purchase, and any honest defence of Menkiti must begin by granting that the 1984 essay says what Gyekye says it says.

¹The term is used in Rawls's sense of a lexical or serial ordering, in which a first-ranked claim must be fully satisfied before a lower-ranked claim carries any weight at all (RAWLS 1999). To say that the 1984 essay subordinates rights lexically is thus stronger than saying duties usually outweigh rights: rights have no independent weight until duties are discharged. The word matters because the argument turns on the disappearance of precisely this ordering, not of every form of communal priority.

Menkiti in 2004: The Revised Formulation

Twenty years later Menkiti restated the same theory, and the restatement is not a reprint. The 2004 chapter retains the core of the earlier account: personhood is still “the sort of thing which has to be achieved, the sort of thing at which individuals could fail” (MENKITI 2004, 326), it is still bound up with what he calls “the notion of moral arrival” (MENKITI 2004, 326), and the community remains indispensable to its attainment (MENKITI 2004). What it does not retain is the ranking: the subordination of rights to duties, and the diagram of society as prior to individuals, do not reappear; the one diagram the chapter contains ranks categories of being, not community over individual (MENKITI 2004).

A markedly more individual-attentive reading of the very maxim that had seemed most communal takes their place. Menkiti now glosses Mbiti’s maxim that one is because the community is (MBITI 1990) with a pointed restriction: its force does not translate into “He is because we are” or “You are because we are.” The sense of the maxim “is not that of a person speaking on behalf of, or in reference to, another,” but that of an individual who recognises the sources of his or her own humanity and sees that, absent others, “no grounds exist for a claim regarding the individual’s own standing as a person”; “the notion at work here,” he writes, “is the notion of an extended self” (MENKITI 2004, 324). And where the 1984 essay ended on the priority of duties, the 2004 chapter ends on the worth of the individual. Its closing move draws on John Rawls: those with the capacity for moral personality are owed the duties of justice, which carries, in Menkiti’s words, “the confirmation therein implied of the individual’s worth as a person” (MENKITI 2004, 330). The direction of obligation is the decisive datum: where the 1984 essay made the individual the one who owes, the 2004 chapter makes the individual the one who is owed, so that even a vocabulary of duty now terminates in the individual’s standing. A reader who insists that talk of duty keeps Menkiti within the 1984 ranking must explain why the party to whom the duties run has changed from community to person; that reversal is a difference in the structure of the claim, not of emphasis.

The shift should not be overstated. The 2004 Menkiti remains a communitarian: personhood is still achieved through community, and the self is still an extended, relational self. He has not converted to liberal individualism. What he has done is abandon the lexical subordination of the individual that made the 1984 essay vulnerable, and recast the relation as one in which community is constitutive of the person rather than superior to it.

It may be objected that this reads a change of emphasis as a change of doctrine: Menkiti did not retract the 1984 ranking, he merely declined to repeat it, and silence is not recantation. Three considerations meet the objection. First, the change is doctrinally located: the subordination of rights to duties was the 1984 essay’s concluding thesis, stated and diagrammed, so what disappears in 2004 is a stated position, not a passing stress. Second, the disappearance is replacement, not bare omission. A compressed reference-work entry is exactly where a still-held central thesis would be restated in brief, since compression pushes an author toward the claims he most wants preserved; instead, in the argumentative place the ranking had occupied, the 2004 chapter installs the reframed maxim and the closing appeal to the individual’s worth. A statement that ends on the worth of the

individual where its predecessor ended on the priority of duties has altered its position, not its tone. Third, the reading does not rest on Menkiti's intentions: two texts by the same author differ at the decisive point, and an interpreter is entitled, indeed obliged, to take the later and more considered statement as the mature view. The claim is textual, not biographical.

A further objection is evidential: two texts are a thin base for a developmental claim. But these are the two occasions on which Menkiti set out his theory of personhood as a general statement. The 1984 essay propounds it and the 2004 chapter restates it for a reference work, so the comparison is between like and like, and the question of whether he revised the ranking can be settled only where he states the theory. No later statement reinstates the subordination that the 2004 chapter drops. Menkiti's retrospective revisits the theory without restoring the ranking; it re-affirms the first-personal reading of the maxim (MENKITI 2018) and cautions that the label radical communitarianism be handled with care, his claims being "more a point in descriptive metaphysics" (MENKITI 2018, 164) than a ranking of moral judgement. His late essay on community runs the same way, condemning ideological collectivism for having "declared war on the dignity of human persons" in the name of community (MENKITI 2017, 471) and making mutuality, willing rather than forced communal life, the measure of a community worth having (MENKITI 2017). The developmental reading claims no more than the canonical statements license: at the one point on which the debate turns, the later text withholds what the earlier one asserted.

Gyekye's Moderate Communitarianism and the Convergence

Gyekye's alternative is built to secure the individual. His moderate communitarianism sets out to acknowledge "the intrinsic worth and dignity of the individual human person" (GYEKYE 1997, 40), and it does so by ascribing to communality and individuality "the status of an equal moral standing" (GYEKYE 1997, 41), on the ground that "no human society is absolutely communal or absolutely individualistic" and that neither term can do without the other, the community unable to dispense with "the talents and initiative of its individual members" (GYEKYE 1997, 41). He grounds individuality in the tradition itself: his reading of the Akan concept of destiny stresses the uniqueness of each person, fitted for a particular sphere of action (GYEKYE 1995). A communitarianism that shrugged off individual rights would, he writes, "saw off the branch on which it was sitting" (GYEKYE 1997, 64): inconsistent as theory, self-defeating in practice.

Yet Gyekye also sets limits to rights. Individual rights are, for the moderate communitarian, "not absolute, though important" (GYEKYE 1997, 65); communal values may be regarded as occasionally overriding; and he is explicit that he has indicated "when the common good of the society justifiably trumps individual rights" (GYEKYE 1997, 66), instancing restrictions on expression or association that threaten social peace or national integration (GYEKYE 1997). The limitation is not ad hoc; it follows from what the common good is: "a good that is common to individual human beings . . . a good the possession of which is essential for the

ordinary or basic functioning of the individual in a human society” (GYEKYE 1997, 45). Because the common good is defined through the basic functioning of each individual, the override it licenses runs through individual good rather than against it; rights yield to the conditions of everyone’s functioning, not to the mere assertion of collective will. Rights, for Gyekye, are real, weighty, and defeasible in specified, publicly consequential cases.

Set the two fullest statements side by side: Menkiti’s 2004 restatement and Gyekye’s 1997 book, which develops the 1992 essay into its most complete formulation. The word *mature* does different work in the two cases: development in Menkiti, who wrote twice and changed; elaboration in Gyekye, whose position acquired its full apparatus without changing. The claim of doctrinal movement is made about Menkiti alone. Gyekye affirms equal standing while allowing the common good to override rights in limited cases; the 2004 Menkiti affirms the individual’s standing as one owed the duties of justice while holding the community to be constitutive of the person. Neither subordinates the individual lexically, and neither dissolves the individual into the group; both treat the relation as mutual dependence in which communal claims may sometimes weigh more heavily. Menkiti’s closing image points the same way: societies must recognise that “they are caught up in an inextricable dance with their component individuals” (MENKITI 2004, 326), a picture of mutual implication, not ranked terms. The collapse critics argued that Gyekye’s moderate view slides toward the radical (MATOLINO 2009; ANSAH and MENSAH 2018; CHIMAKONAM and NWEKE 2018); the developmental reading shows the converse and more telling movement, Menkiti’s mature view sliding toward the moderate. From either side, the distinction fails to track a real difference.

The Resulting Position and Its Conditions of Legitimacy

The developmental reading dissolves a classification. It does not by itself say what the relation between individual and community is once neither is subordinated, and the dissolution is stable only if the converged position can be stated in its own right. Three tasks remain: the position must be named and given content; distinguished from Gyekye’s formulation, or the convergence collapses into Menkiti simply becoming a Gyekye; and equipped to face the objection that communal authority harms individuals. The rest of the article discharges these tasks, and the legitimacy conditions below are not an appendix to the developmental reading but its completion: they state what deliberation must be if the standing both mature texts affirm is to be more than declared.

Call the converged position *impartial communitarianism*, a name introduced in earlier work for the claim that indigenous African communitarianism recognises both the individual and the community rather than subordinating the former (LARYEA 2020). On this view, the two stand in a relation of mutual constitution in which neither is assigned lexical priority in advance, the weighting of their claims being settled case by case within the community’s deliberative life rather than read off a fixed ranking. The impartiality is *ex ante* and procedural, a refusal of antecedent priority to either side, not a claim that the two must weigh equally in every case; this is what distinguishes the position from Gyekye’s and

earns it a third label. Gyekye secures the individual by a substantive thesis about comparative weight, equal moral standing. Impartial communitarianism advances no such thesis; it withholds priority at the outset and remits the weighting to deliberation, so communal claims may justifiably prevail in a given case without being ranked above the individual in principle. The difference is real because the two theses are violated by different things. The equal-standing thesis is contradicted whenever a settled practice weighs communal claims above individual ones, however the weighting was reached; impartial communitarianism is contradicted only by a weighting fixed in advance of deliberation. The two come apart wherever legitimately conducted deliberation assigns communal claims the greater weight: the equal-standing thesis must count the result a mistake, impartial communitarianism need not. The developmental reading brings Menkiti to the threshold of Gyekye's view without delivering him to its equal-standing thesis. It is also distinct from Matolino's limited communitarianism, which likewise declines automatic priority to the community (MATOLINO 2018): his refusal concerns the constitution of persons and pluralises the communitarian thesis into one approach among several; here the normative conception is retained and the refusal of antecedent priority concerns the deliberative weighting of claims, which is why the view owes, and supplies, legitimacy conditions. The present argument also relocates the earlier case for impartiality (LARYEA 2020): established there by the observation that rights in the tradition are secondary but not absent, it is established here by the development from 1984 to 2004.

To call the balance a matter of situated deliberation is to name a procedure, not to specify one, and a critic will rightly ask what distinguishes legitimate deliberation from the will of the powerful dressed as consensus. The tradition supplies the materials for an answer. Three conditions, drawn from the deliberative institutions of the societies in question rather than imposed on them, mark the difference. They resonate with familiar proceduralist criteria, but the resemblance is not derivation: they are reconstructed from the practices described below, offered as norms immanent in those practices rather than descriptions of their always-imperfect realisation. That the historical institutions fell short of them, excluding women, the young, and the unfree, is not an objection to the reconstruction but the reason one is needed.

The first is inclusion: a deliberative outcome binds legitimately only if those whose standing is at stake can take part and contest its direction. The institution is not hypothetical. The Akan polity Busia describes exercised authority through councils on which, through the lineage system, the community was represented (BUSIA 1951); and where formal authority excluded a group, the tradition could furnish channels of contestation, as in the Igbo institution in which women acted collectively to call to account a man who had wronged one of their number (VAN ALLEN 1972). "Sitting on a man" was not extra-institutional protest but a recognised procedure with its own occasions and forms, so the condition of inclusion is the principle the institution already enacts, not a criterion imported and then found satisfied. Drawing on more than one tradition is deliberate: conditions of this type recur across distinct polities, which accords with the pluralism Masolo urges (MASOLO 2010). Deliberation that permanently silences the persons whose claims it decides fails this condition whatever its form.

The second is answerability to the standard of reciprocal recognition, and it is what prevents collapse into majoritarianism. Because, on both Menkiti's and Gyekye's telling, personhood is constituted through reciprocal regard and the dignity attaching to the capacity for communal relationship, an outcome is open to criticism, however widely endorsed, if it withholds that regard from some of those it governs. A consensus to maim, exclude, or subordinate is not legitimated by being a consensus; it is convicted by the very standard that gives communal life its worth. The same standard answers the contention that rights here are only entitlements the community may justifiably withdraw (CHIMAKONAM and NWEKE 2018): withdrawal that withholds reciprocal recognition is precisely what it marks as illegitimate. Legitimacy here is not mere agreement but agreement answerable to dignity. It may be objected that this condition sits uneasily with the view's own metaphysics: a personhood that is achieved and admits of degrees appears to license withholding recognition from those who have not yet arrived, the child above all. The objection mistakes the object of the standard. What grounds the recognition owed in deliberation is not the degree of personhood a member has attained but the capacity for communal relationship that every human being possesses (IKUENOBE 2016; METZ 2010), the capacity in virtue of which the not-yet-arrived are persons in the making. Menkiti himself points this way twice over: in 2004, the capacity for moral personality that grounds the duties of justice is a potentiality that may or may not yet be realised (MENKITI 2004); in his final statement on the theory, persons on the journey of becoming are "acknowledged to have intrinsic weight" and "we are all equal as persons despite any variations in social status" (MENKITI 2018, 165-166). Recent comparative work sharpens both objection and reply: Jecker and Atuire hold that accounts on which individuals can fail at personhood allow moral inequalities, and that a satisfactory account must establish all human beings as moral equals (JECKER and ATUIRE 2025); yet their survey also separates the achieved, gradational sense of personhood from the strand grounding moral standing in the innate capacity for communal relations (JECKER and ATUIRE 2025). The reply offered here holds the two apart in just that way, from within the tradition. Achieved personhood is an evaluative, developmental status, not a gate on moral consideration. The tradition's treatment of the child as a person in becoming carries an entailment its critics overlook: the community owes each member the conditions of arrival. A practice that maims a girl, or conscripts a child into a marriage she cannot refuse, forecloses the very arrival the view prizes, and is condemned by its developmental logic rather than excused by it.

The third is reversibility: legitimate authority must be revisable, its holders removable when they exercise it illegitimately. Here too the institution is concrete. The Akan held, as Busia records, a constitutional right to destool a chief: only those who installed him could remove him, and a ruler who broke the community's norms or governed cruelly could be, and was, deposed (BUSIA 1951). Menkiti's retrospective endorses the same power from below: chiefs who commit "recognizably cruel acts" may be pronounced non-persons by "the persons whom they ruled" (MENKITI 2018, 166). An order with mechanisms of contestation and removal differs in kind from one in which authority, once exercised, is beyond recall.

Situated deliberation, then, is not any process a community happens to run, but inclusive, dignity-answerable, and revisable deliberation. So specified, impartial communitarianism is a position with content, and its conditions do real work: they are precisely what the hard cases of the next section violate. The contribution claimed through it is modest: not a new principle, but a clearer map, on which the long quarrel rests on a frozen reading of Menkiti and the two leading positions prove far closer than their labels suggest.

The Hardest Test: Communal Authority and the Individual

A communitarianism that pointed only to harmonious arrangements would invite an obvious objection, and it must be met directly. Communal authority across many African societies has not balanced individual interests so much as overridden them, often at the expense of women and children. Female genital cutting, the virginity testing of girls, and early or forced marriage are not marginal counter-examples but practices in which custom and collective identity have been asserted against the bodily integrity and autonomy of individuals who could not effectively refuse. A critic in Gyekye's tradition will say this is exactly what to expect once personhood depends on conformity to communal norms, vindicating the worry that a duty-weighted communitarianism leaves the individual exposed.

I concede the descriptive core of the objection. It would be false to claim that African communities have reliably protected individuals against communal power; the practices just named show otherwise, and a philosophy that romanticised traditional balance would be apologetics, not analysis. What I deny is the inference from these practices to the normative content of the view, and it fails because the practices violate the legitimacy conditions the view itself imposes. The inclusion condition must be stated with care, for it is not the claim that women have stood outside these practices: in female genital cutting women have often been the principal custodians and practitioners, and an account picturing the practice as simply imposed by men on excluded women would be historically false. The condition concerns standing in deliberation, not participation in performance, and above all the person whose body is decided: the girl herself, who typically can neither refuse nor contest, and whose capacity to revisit the decision is foreclosed by its being made in childhood and marked on the body. A practice may be administered by members of the affected group and still breach the condition, because the deliberation that sustains it neither includes the persons on whom it is performed nor leaves the outcome open to their later contestation. The deeper breach lies in the second condition: whatever the composition of the deliberating body, an outcome that maims or coerces withholds the recognition that, on both accounts, constitutes communal standing (IKUENOBE 2016; METZ 2007). Such practices are therefore condemnable by the tradition's own lights, not only by imported liberal norms; the materials for the criticism are indigenously.

A concession is required here, one that confident defences of communitarianism usually omit. It concerns uptake rather than the availability of critique: the tradition supplies the materials for criticising these practices, but when one asks how they have in fact been corrected, the leading African examples point outward, not inward. The clearest adjudicated instances concern customary

matters other than the three practices above, and are introduced because they exhibit, more sharply than the largely legislative response to those practices, the relation between external override and internal reform. In *Bhe v Magistrate, Khayelitsha* (2005), the South African Constitutional Court struck down the customary rule of male primogeniture on the constitutional grounds of equality and dignity; the majority, per Langa DCJ, declined to develop the customary rule from within under section 39(2) and applied the Bill of Rights directly, while Ngcobo J's dissent urged internal reform. The correction was external override, not the tradition criticising itself. *S v Makwanyane* (1995) runs the other way: the Court invoked ubuntu, an African relational value, while abolishing capital punishment, widening rather than narrowing individual protection. That reasoning has been contested as proving too much (METZ 2010), but the case exhibits the possibility my thesis needs, an indigenous value doing critical work against communal harm. Together the cases locate the difficulty: the normative resources for internal critique exist, as *Makwanyane* shows; their institutional realisation has come largely through external constitutional means, as *Bhe* shows. The gap is between an available critique and its uptake, and making the critique explicit, as this article does, is a precondition of uptake, not a substitute for it.

I therefore advance impartial communitarianism with an explicit limit: it is a normative reconstruction of how the relation between individual and community can be understood within African thought, not a description of how it has been instantiated, nor a claim that the tradition has reliably corrected its own abuses. Read this way, the hard cases are not an embarrassment to be explained away but the test that distinguishes a defensible communitarianism from an apologetic one, and the view survives only by yielding genuine criticism of the practices and admitting how much of the work of reform has come from outside custom.

Method: Conceptual Decolonisation and Its Limits

The interpretive method is what Wiredu calls conceptual decolonisation: terms such as right and person carry, in their European usage, commitments that may not survive translation into Akan or other African conceptual schemes, and the philosopher's task is to make those commitments visible rather than assume them (WIREDU 1996; 2004). The dichotomy between individual rights and communal duties can look sharper than it is when European categories are imported wholesale; read on their own terms, African accounts of personhood may locate the individual's standing differently rather than deny it. This is not a promissory note: the re-reading of Menkiti above turns on exactly this move, declining to treat his subordination of rights to duties as the subordination of the individual the European coupling would imply, and reading his person as a standing achieved in relation rather than a property possessed apart. Metz's comparative work makes the point from another angle: the salient difference between Western and African moral thought may lie less in whether dignity is recognised than in what grounds it, the African strand locating dignity in the capacity for communal relationship rather than Kantian autonomy (METZ 2007; 2010).

The method has an Afrocentric inflection, in the limited sense Molefi Kete Asante gives the term: treating African experience as the experience of subjects and refusing to read African concepts as defective approximations of European ones (ASANTE 1998). But the heavier work is done by Wiredu's more strictly philosophical version of the demand; the claim is methodological, not a programme of cultural assertion. Taking the tradition seriously on its own terms cuts both ways: to read African concepts on their own terms is also to hold the tradition to its own standards, which licenses the internal criticism of harmful practice above. The methodological commitment and the critical one are a single stance: taking a tradition seriously enough to argue with it.

Conclusion

The debate over whether Menkiti's communitarianism is radical or moderate has been conducted as though there were a single Menkiti to classify. There are, in the relevant respect, two. The 1984 essay subordinates the individual and invites Gyekye's charge; the 2004 restatement withdraws the subordination, foregrounds the individual's standing and worth, and frames the community as constitutive of the person rather than superior to it. Once this development is admitted, the mature Menkiti and the moderate Gyekye converge, and the radical/moderate dichotomy ceases to mark a real difference between them.

The value of the reading is that it meets rather than evades the hardest objection to any communitarian view. Female genital cutting, virginity testing, and child marriage are real, and they have harmed real people under the authority of custom; a defensible communitarianism cannot deny this. The two halves of the argument are at their closest here: the legitimacy conditions that condemn these practices, inclusion, answerability to reciprocal recognition, and reversibility, are drawn from the commitments the mature Menkiti and Gyekye share, so the criticism of communal harm is not an addendum to the developmental reading but what that reading makes available. The view specifies those conditions, shows that these practices violate them, and concedes candidly that the institutional work of reform has so far depended heavily on external constitutional means. The contribution is modest and interpretive: not a new principle, but a clearer account of an old debate, and a communitarianism that earns its name by submitting itself to criticism.

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