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## Critique of Ifeanyi Menkiti's Idea of Person and Community

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**Abstract-** We are in a society where its system permits an individual to take precedence over a group/community; the reason why we often put wealth above good character. In Africa, some scholars, text and philosophers have attributed this social woe on imperial influx that took over African traditional institution around 19th century. In his quest to search for socio-cultural, metaphysical, epistemic and moral constituents of a person, Ifeanyi Menkiti, a prolific African philosopher gave a turgid articulation on the Person and Community in African Traditional Thought, with a sharp position that a community/group takes precedence over a person/individual. Put difference, it is a community that defines an individual. This paper therefore is committed to review and critically examine contents in this Menkiti's radical communitarian position. Doing this, we shall examine the essence of a person/individual (with a special focus on metaphysical, epistemic and moral constituents of a person), the process of incorporation in traditional African society, and the idea of depersonalization. This paper assumes that Menkiti's failed to acknowledge the roles of an infant and the dead (ancestors) in the organization and development of a community.

**Keywords:** *individual, personhood, community, incorporation.*

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# Critique of Ifeanyi Menkiti's Idea of Person and Community

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## I. INTRODUCTION

In contemporary African society, there have been argument between homegrown and western trained philosophers and religious scholars on the problem of communitarianism and person/ personhood in traditional African thought; it raises question on what constitutes a relationship between individual and community (see Oyeshile, 2011; Kaphagawani, 1998; Ifeanyi Menkiti, 1984; Gbadegesin, 2004; Mbiti, 1970; Gyekye, 1997; Blyden, 1908). For instance, Ifeanyi Menkiti in his famous essay, *Person and Community in African Traditional Thought* made a vivid argument that "community takes a precedent over an individual"<sup>1</sup>; what makes an individual is a community. Menkiti's thought in

this context is alluding the virtues of relatedness and dependency of an individual, though, it does not point at some form of total subservience of an individual to the 'we', but points to some state of individuality.

Against this backdrop, this paper aim is to interrogate the view of Ifeanyi Menkiti's communitarian approach on the concept of person/personhood in traditional African thought. Doing this, we seek to know whether the picture given by this philosopher is the case in traditional African society; we shall open discourse on Menkiti's community and individual thesis. Moreover, we shall critically examine the problem of "it" and "incorporation" and choice and freedom as related to Menkiti's worldview.

## II. CONCEPT OF PERSON/PERSONHOOD

The concept of person is one of the metaphysical speculations which have generated a lot of debates and controversies among African scholars for decades. Clarifications on what constitutes a human person vary from one ethnic group to another. However, just like some other metaphysical concepts in traditional African society, there is a consensus and sufficient evidence that "human person" constitutes a dualistic conception of reality.<sup>2</sup> For instance, one of the things that constituted a human person in African ontology, Yoruba ethnic group to be precise is *Ori*; this can be view both sensibly (physical) and nonsensibly (spiritual). Hence, a human person shares an intrinsic interrelationship on objects of experience and imperceptible reality.

The concept of a person held by a group of people is fundamental in understanding not only how a person within such framework of thought views himself but also how other matters such as the idea of being, morality, knowledge and truth that are essential for the ordering of the society are viewed. This is emphasized by the fact that such a concept encapsulates the role the society expects an individual to play for the attainment of an orderly society and this makes it inevitable for African Scholars to write on the conception of a person from the Africans perspectives.

The idea of personhood in the African perspective denote community or social approval base

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<sup>1</sup> Menkiti, I.A. 1984. "Person and Community in African Traditional Thought".in R. A. Wright (ed.), *African Philosophy an Introduction* 3rd edition. Lanham: University Press of America.

<sup>2</sup> Ekanola, A.B. 2006. "Metaphysical Issues in African Philosophy." in Olusegun Oladipo, (ed.), in *Core Issues in African Philosophy*. Ibadan: Hope Publication Ltd. 79-80.

on the moral status of a person within the strata. In this regard, Oladipo argues thus;

Africans do not make a radical distinction between the mind and the body. Selfhood or personhood rather has to do with social relations. You become a person because your status in the community both moral and otherwise is acceptable.<sup>3</sup>

The position above alludes Menkiti's thought on community-person relationship; it is the community that confer personhood on a person and defines person as a person. The question then is, can person be called a person within or outside the community on the virtue of his/her moral worthiness or intrinsic value over other things (beings). On this account, Maduka<sup>4</sup> argues that personhood is not what one has to work for or acquire. It is rather inherent in one's ontological nature. Thus, whether the community recognizes it or not, a person remains a person because of the possession of intrinsic worth or value over other creations.

To Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria, a person is believed to be made up of three important parts. These are the "Ara" which is the material body, including the internal organs of a person; the "Emi" which is the life-giving element and the "Ori" which is the individuality element that is responsible for a person's personality. In Akan ontology, Kwasi Wiredu claims that human person consists of five elements namely the "Okra" (a life-giving entity), the "Sunsum" (the spirit that gives a personality its force) and the "Honam" or "Nipadua" (body).<sup>5</sup>

Other elements that make up a human person in Akan has highlighted by Kwasi Wiredu are the Mogya, this means blood taken by the Akan to be derived from one's mother and is regarded to be a basis for clan identity. *Ntoro* (that which is responsible for the cast of personality). This is believed to be inherited from one's father and regarded to be the basis of membership of a patrilineal group. However, *Mogya and Ntoro* according to Wiredu can be attributed to a genetic rudiment.<sup>6</sup>

Taking a slide away from the metaphysical and some biological aspect of human person to social discourse, the traditional African society was built on a solid rock of dependency which Oladipo argues that it sprang from the two essential principles of traditional African society; (i) appeal to duty and public-spiritedness as important factor in the definition of personhood; and (ii) abhorrence of all forms of "selfish-individualism", include greed and exploitation.<sup>7</sup> The

former can said to be interdependence and holds a spirit of solidarity as a hub of society, this according to him is a by-product of "a moral conception of personhood".<sup>8</sup>

The above conception of personhood supposes that person's fulfilment in the community is tied to his/her obligation to such community and other people; this is an important factor that determines person status in traditional African society. As further stressed by Oladipo, "been elderly, having financial capability and been powerful without significant relation on the society or people around doesn't command respect in the traditional African society. In fact, in most cases, such persons are considered irresponsible, a nominal human being (*eniyanlasan*, in Yoruba) if he was consistently failing in his/her duty to the community, or was too self-centered to care about his or her obligation to his/her fellow human being.<sup>9</sup> Put differently, a person is not measured basically on wealth, power and material possession, rather through human feeling expressed in action, for the interest and advancement of the community and the well-being of others. For more explication, the dependence of an individual (person) on community in traditional African society is discussed in what follows.

### III. BETWEEN PERSON AND COMMUNITY (GENERAL OVERVIEW)

The discourse on the relatedness of an individual and community is not a core to African society and scholars alone, it is a discourse cut across the world and disciplines (sociology, anthropology, religious studies, philosophy etc.). In the western world, there has been a debate on liberalism and communitarianism; a pointer to the relationship between individual and community. Oyeshile aptly stated this in his expression concerning the relationship between the community and the individual;

Within the Western European tradition, there have been two perspectives concerning the relationship between the community and the individual. We have the liberal or libertarian theory or tradition and the communitarian theory or tradition. These two perspectives have various versions depending on the author's background.<sup>10</sup>

The idea such as social character, solidarity, traditions and values, freedom and social responsibility underlies libertarian activities. On the other hand, communitarianism is rooted in the supreme value and it is important to the ethical state. In this regard, Hegel (cited in Masolo) argues that "it is in the ethical state alone that the individual can achieve freedom and self-

<sup>3</sup> Oladipo, O. 2006. ed. *Core Issues in African Philosophy*. Ibadan: Hope Publication Ltd.

<sup>4</sup> Maduka, E. 2019. A Critical Exposition of *Madukakism* as a Theory of Being Human in Contemporary Africa. *Sociology and Anthropology* 7(3). 126

<sup>5</sup> Kwasi, Wiredu. 1989. The Concept of Mind. *Ibadan Journal of Humanistic Studies*, 3(4). 119

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* 119

<sup>7</sup> Oladipo, O. 2009. *Philosophy and Social Reconstruction*. Ibadan: Hope Publication Ltd. 81

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* 80

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Oyeshile, O.A. 2006. The Individual-Community Relationship as an Issue in Social and Political Philosophy. In Olusegun Oladipo (Ed), *Core Issues in African Philosophy*. Ibadan: Hope Publication Limited

fulfilment through participation in its transcendental life."<sup>11</sup> This supposes that belongingness and the values of an individual are undetachable from the values and ethical stances held by the community. However, this is not the case to the libertarians, they hold the view that relevancy of an individual or person is attached to his/her existential wheel. Hence, to libertarians, the participation of an individual in a community matter is through self-fulfilment, freedom and choice, moral development and agency.<sup>12</sup>

Addressing this in African perspective, the relatedness of individual and community for instance in traditional Yoruba society, the community is seen as a network or relationships, institutions and their underlining norms, which provide the conditions for individual security, identity and well-being. In a sense, then, the individual is dependent of the community for his/her fulfilment; the community provides the ambivalence under which he/she pursues his/her interest.<sup>13</sup> This idea of individual/community relatedness is succinctly put by Mbiti;

In traditional life, the individual does not and cannot exist alone except corporately. He owes his existence to other people, including those of the past generations and his contemporaries. He is simply part of the whole. The community must therefore make, create or produce the individual, for the individual depend on the corporate group.<sup>14</sup>

According to Oladipo, the idea of the dependence of an individual on the community is well represented in Yoruba proverb; *Enikanki I je awa de* (an individual does not make a community); *Agbajo owo ni a nfi so aya* (unity is strength); *Igi kan ko le da igbo se* (a tree does not make a forest); *Ai ko owo rin omo ejo ni n fi iku pa won* (lack of unity in a community makes it susceptible to danger).<sup>15</sup>

What this suppose is that in traditional African society (Yoruba), there is an outright alteration of the case of an individual over a community. Hence, the existence of an individual cannot be ascertained in Yoruba communal worldview. The reason for this is not far-fetched because individual understands and appreciates the meaning of community; "I am because we are". In the like manner, Mbiti argues that "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore, I am."<sup>16</sup> From this, it follows that there need not be any tension between individuality and community since it is possible

for an individual to freely give up his/her own perceived interest for the survival of the community.<sup>17</sup>

In regards to the above, Gbadegesin argues that in the traditional Yoruba society for instance, 'the process of socialization begins in the family apartment and the household compound finally gets into the larger community where the child is further exposed to the virtues of communal life'.<sup>18</sup> Here children of the community are exposed to the display of selfless efforts by others to uplift the community. They have a first hand of what the adults are contributing to the welfare of children, how women and men work on the farm and how the warrior risks their lives to save the community. Building on the initial exposure in the family compound they now see themselves as one of those who should carry the banner and, having been prepared for the task, they, severally and collectively, cannot but shun individualism. This alludes the dictum of Mbiti I referred to earlier ('I am because we are; I exist because the community exists').

From Igbo perspective, Agulana<sup>19</sup> argues that the security of a person can only be assured based on social and community attachment of such individual. According to him, from the time an individual is born, until the time he dies, he is made aware of his dependence on his kin group and his community. From his earliest age, the individual is made aware not only of his reliance on his community but also of the need to make his contribution to the group to which he owes much.<sup>20</sup>

To further argue the dependency of an individual on the community, Igbo principle of social life is premised on the what Agulana described as 'beneficial reciprocity' – the realization that no individual is an 'island' unto himself. No individual (or spirit), the Igbo aver, no matter how strong, is self-sufficient.<sup>21</sup> This view is well corroborated in Theophilus Okere's argument on *philosophy, culture and society in Africa* where he stated thus;

Man is not just an individual, an island, left to himself and sufficient to himself, on his own. Man is essentially community. No one ever came to being as a bolt from the blues, like an oil bean seed falling from the sky, as our proverb says, 'I am always we'. We in the nuclear family, we in the extended family, we in the village and town etc..<sup>22</sup>

What the above supposes is that traditional African society frown at individualism within the cultural context of human existence; individual's achievement

<sup>11</sup> Masolo, D.A. 2004. "Western and African Communitarianism: A Comparison" in K. Wiredu (ed.). *A Companion to African Philosophy*. USA: Blackwell Publication. 484

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 486

<sup>13</sup> Oladipo O. 2009. Op. cit. 78.

<sup>14</sup> Mbiti, J.S. 1970. *African Religions and Philosophies*. New York: Anchor Books.

<sup>15</sup> Oladipo O. 2009. Op. cit. 79.

<sup>16</sup> Mbiti, J.S. 1970. Op. cit. 108-109.

<sup>17</sup> Gbadegesin, S. 1991. *African Philosophy: Traditional Yoruba Philosophy and Contemporary African Realities*. New York: Peter Lang.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid

<sup>19</sup> Agulana, C. O. 2010. Community and Human Well-Being in An African Culture. *Trames*, Vol. 14(64/59). 290

<sup>20</sup> Ibid

<sup>21</sup> Ibid

<sup>22</sup> Okere, T. 2005. *Philosophy, culture and society in Africa*. Nsukka: Afro-Orbis Publications. 3



within the community would be daunting without the support of other communal.

This same theme of individuality-in-community is prominent in other African social thoughts. For instance, K. A. Busia (as cited in Gbadagesin) says of the Akan that

There is, everywhere, the heavy accent on family—the blood relatives. the group of kinsfolk held together by a common origin and a common obligation to its members, to those who are living and those who are dead .... The individual is brought up to think of himself in relation to this group and to behave always in such a way as to bring honour and not disgrace to its members. The ideal set before him is that of mutual helpfulness and cooperation within the group of kinsfolk.<sup>23</sup>

Furthermore:

Cooperation and mutual helpfulness are virtues enjoined as essential; without them, the kingroup cannot long endure. Its survival depends on its solidarity.<sup>24</sup>

And Gyekye recalls an Akan proverb on the same theme; “the prosperity [or well-being] of a man depends upon his fellow-man”.<sup>25</sup> Such proverbs are numerous in Africa social thought and they help to point up the wisdom of traditional thinkers concerning matters pertaining to the good of the community. On the contrary, he argued that though a person maybe described as communitarian by virtue of being born into an existing community, yet such a community does not determine his humanity. Instead he/she remains a person by virtue of the morality of his/her conduct. Therefore, person is defined by the virtue of his/her moral values or qualities.<sup>26</sup> This Gyekye's position seem crooked because it failed to address other essential aspects (which may be existential or metaphysical considering the concept of *Oni*) of personhood of a person, especially in traditional African society.

#### IV. MENKITI'S NOTION OF INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNITY

Ifeanyi Menkiti in his work titled *Person and Community in African Traditional Thought* argued mainly that there are wide gaps and demarcations between African conception of person and various western thoughts on person/personhood. This argument was intrigued by the popular view of J.S. Mbiti which says that 'I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am'. Menkiti contrasted this with western thoughts which see ontology of man from 'lone individual' is limited to physiological and psychological factors; an essential feature of makes a person (man).<sup>27</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Busia, K.A. 1962. *The Challenge of Africa*. New York: Praeger. 33

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* 34

<sup>25</sup> Gyekye, K. 1987. An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: in H. Odera Oruka and D. A. Masolo (eds.) *Philosophy and Cultures*. Nairobi: Bookwise. 13

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* 110

<sup>27</sup> Menkiti, I.A. 1984. Op. cit. 171

Menkiti's communitarian thought as intrigued by Mbiti's dictum may be simply put as “we and I”; a communitarian root of African thoughts. Menkiti interprets this claim as implying that a ‘person’ (at times he uses the term ‘personhood’ to denote a ‘person’) is (1) not defined by certain attributes that reside in him or her but by the community and that (2) the community takes precedence over individuals, their needs and aspirations. I now undertake to interrogate these two points in the light of the identified African dictum.

These two points are significant to Menkiti's understandings of a person because it underlines human ontology in traditional African society. The objective is to establish whether it may not admit of some interpretations that are somewhat different from the interpretation that Menkiti has used to defend the thesis that the community principally overrides the individual. In my view, it appears as if the rendered and common interpretation of this dictum that Menkiti holds underlines the ‘we’ in the dictum as the basis of the contention that the community defines and overrides the individual. To Menkiti;

A crucial distinction thus exists between the African view of man and the view of man found in Western thought: in the African view, it is the community which defines the person as a person, not some isolated static quality of rationality, will, or memory.<sup>28</sup>

Furthermore, personhood, to Menkiti is only achieved in traditional African society through what he called ‘process of incorporation. Menkiti Succinctly put it thus;

After birth, the individual goes through the different rites of incorporation, including those of initiation at puberty time, before becoming a full person in the eyes of the community. And then, of course, there is procreation, old age, death, and entry into the community of departed ancestral spirits—a community viewed as continuous with the community of living men and women, and with which it is conceived as being in constant interaction.<sup>29</sup>

What this supposes is that person must be socially and culturally transformed before attainment of personhood or before according a reasonable identity in a community. However, this claim is not without flaws; for instance, if what defines a person is a community, then, it possible for a person (man or woman) not to be a person. Hence, this view is not rationally acceptable because our idea of person in most cases is premised on the biological composition and reasoning.

It is worth noting that most of the Menkiti's positions are addressing the question of ‘personhood’ and not ‘person’ in his communitarian presentations. In fact, he seems to conflate ‘person’ and ‘personhood’, this is considered problematic when it comes to

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* 172

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* 174

conferment of rights on those who fail personhood in this regard, Masaka argues that:

While a person is ontologically prior to and at the same time subsists in personhood, personhood when understood in its normative sense can be said to be something that can be acquired by individuals, much of it, within the confines of a community.<sup>30</sup>

Menkiti seems to confirm this when he argues that 'as far as African societies are concerned, personhood is something at which individuals could fail, at which they could be competent or ineffective, better or worse'.<sup>31</sup> When personhood is understood normatively, I would agree with Menkiti because one's failure may be tied to disregarding the codes and norms that construed the existence of the community to which one belongs by living an undesirable and morally unfulfilling life. Indeed, one may fail to internalize moral principles that guide the behaviour and interactions of people in a particular community. Yet, this does not suppose to mean that an individual's attribute of personhood *qua* person cannot be retained or accommodated in a community that respect and cherished collective coexistence. For Masolo, 'what constitutes a major misinterpretation cum misconception of the human person is construed in the fact that a human person alters individuality in traditional African society'.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, the community appears to have a relatively significant controlling influence over the individual.

The aforementioned appears appealing because if individuals are permitted to be 'themselves' without the regulatory functions of the community, then perhaps they will descend into atomic individualism where the pursuit of self-interest is their primary goal.<sup>33</sup>

## V. ON THE ONTOLOGY OF "IT" AND "INCORPORATION"

As mentioned in the foregoing, Menkiti seeks to provide a normative account of the nature of personhood in African thinking. In his view, personhood is attained when an individual is within the cycle of an "it" and an "it"; an individual goes through an ontological progression over time. This ontological progression is marked by the acquisition and exhibition of moral qualities by an individual. According to him, "in African societies, the ultimate termination of personal existence is marked by an 'it' designation; thus, the same

depersonalized 'reference marking the beginning of personal existence also marks the end of that existence'.<sup>34</sup> This makes an individual ontologically different from what s/he was prior to the acquisition of these characteristics as well as ontologically different from those who have not acquired or do not exhibit these qualities as of yet. Clearly, Menkiti goes for an acquisitive and gradual account of personhood.

Menkiti used the "it" to suggest depersonalised existence. This depersonalised existence is mainly characterised by an absence of personhood. The word "it" applies to human subjects in two instances of their life. The first instance of depersonalised existence is when an individual is a baby or so young that s/he does not have any moral sense. The second stage is when one has joined the world of spirits, which is called collective immortality. For Menkiti, members of these two groups can be referred to as "its" without cause for controversy. However, this position does not help matters much. Even if we were to accept that Menkiti's usage of "it" carries moral or ontological significance, still, he would run into serious difficulties.

The above thesis of "it" by Menkiti creates a kind grievous problem because it failed to give a distinction between the two components of "it" he mentioned i.e. one that begins with the individual's life (birth/infancy) and one at the end of that individual's life (death/collective immortality). He just lumps them together as periods of depersonalised existence. However, on closer examination, there is a huge difference between these "its" which have very unfavourable implications for his use of "it" as a normative indicator. This is more aptly put by Matolino;

The baby whom Menkiti refers to as an "it" that lacks any moral standing, hence ontological status, has yet to live through all the requirements of attaining personhood. In other words, we may refer to her as a potential person. However, a member of the spiritual world of collective immortality has gone through all the stages of personhood and has now attained a different status. Although both categories may be referred to as "its" they are in a radically different relationship to that word in as far as it is meant to carry any ontological weight. One who has moved away from an "it" into a full person and back to another "it" does not quite make a return to the "it" of babies. Babies and ancestors who belong to the world of collective immortality do not stand in the same relationship to the ontological weight of "it." There is a qualitative difference between these two senses of "it," and Menkiti's account ought to acknowledge and clarify that difference and its significance to both instances of the depersonalised existence.<sup>35</sup>

I argue that these two instances of depersonalised existence do not have the same ontological significance and that the burden is on

<sup>30</sup> Masaka, D.2018. Person, Personhood and Individual Rights in Menkiti's African Communitarian Thinking. *Theoria*, Issue 157, Vol. 65, No. 4

<sup>31</sup> Menkiti, I.A. 1984. Op. cit. 173

<sup>32</sup> Masolo, D. A. 2014. 'The Case for Communitarianism: A Reply to Critics', *Quest: An African Journal of Philosophy/Revue Africaine de Philosophie* Vol. 25(1-2): 187.

<sup>33</sup> Masaka, D.2018. Person, Personhood and Individual Rights in Menkiti's African Communitarian Thinking. *Theoria*, Issue 157, Vol. 65, No. 4

<sup>34</sup> Menkiti, I.A. 1984. Op. cit. 174

<sup>35</sup> Matolino, B. 2011. The (Mal) Function of "it" in Ifeanyi Menkiti's Normative Account of Person. *African Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 12(4).

Menkiti to fully articulate the difference and the significance of that difference. If my point is valid then it cannot be the case that babies and ancestors can both be referred to as "its."

More so, the "it" thesis of Menkiti has been criticized massively by scholars and philosophers as an exaggeration of the first order because of its misrepresented ontology of person in traditional African society. For instance, Oyeshile argues that;

Apart from the role of the biological factor in determining personhood, it is also the case that infants cannot be denied personhood in spite of the fact that we cannot apply moral and social norms to them. This is so because they have potentialities for exhibiting these moral norms. The use of the neuter gender "it" for infants and the dead varies from society to society. In Yoruba society, for instance, the neuter gender "it" is neither used for infants nor used without exception for the dead. Furthermore, ancestral worship is an indication that the dead are still regarded as members of the living community. It is often stressed that the communal relationship of an African is in three dimensions, namely, his relation with the living, the dead and the unborn.<sup>36</sup>

On the account of incorporation, Menkiti maintains that moral status is accorded to a person on the account of incorporation. Incorporation to him supposes the process of social and ritual transformation man passes through until it attains the full complement of excellencies seen as truly definitive of man.<sup>37</sup> In this regard, incorporation suggests the process of enculturation. It is through this process that moral norms and social rules are learned; it is necessary for the sustenance of the biological component and the attainment of selfhood in traditional African society. As regards this, the depersonalized existence of especially an infant cannot be inferred from Menkiti's idea of personhood. This is because the attainment of personhood is not on the effort of a community on an individual, rather a serious effort for an individual to meet-up the required rites of incorporation and necessary for a person to make sure that his/her life align with the moral standards of the community. Hence, self-worth is not automatic in incorporation as presented by Menkiti, rather, a deliberate effort made by an individual to ensure their life meet moral standard.

Furthermore, an existentialist theme in Menkiti's thought on traditional African society denies the place of an individual existence in the scheme of choice (freedom) and responsibility which is the foundation of western existentialists philosophy. For instance, Jean Paul Sartre claimed that freedom is absolute and existence is freedom. Just to agree with Menkiti in a way, an infant does not have intellectual capabilities to freely make a choice on what constitutes absurdities of life. However, Menkiti also exaggerates the fact that in traditional African society collective insistence played a

significant role in choice-making with less or no consideration from individual or self-definition. He argues thus;

African understanding of human community plays a crucial role in the individual's acquisition of full personhood, in the Sartrean existentialist view, the individual alone defines the self or person, he is to become. Such collectivist insistences as we find in the African world-view are utterly lacking in the Existentialist tradition. And this difference in the two approaches is not accidental. Rather it arises because there is at bottom a fundamental disagreement as to what reality is all about.<sup>38</sup>

Kwame Gyekye, an Akan scholar rejected the view mentioned above, to him, it is an erroneous approach to individual and community relationship; it denies ingenuity, creativity and perhaps, human right and self-esteem.<sup>39</sup>

## VI. CONCLUSION

So far, the paper examined Ifeanyi Menkiti's *Person and Community in African Traditional Thought*. I argued that Menkiti's communitarian thesis that places community over the will of a person is a futile one since it places less value on human self-determination cum self-actualisation. The relationship between community and person in traditional African society founded in J.S. Mbiti's popular communitarian dictum "I am because we are, since we are, therefore, I am"; this is also a foundation to which Ifeanyi Menkiti's radical communitarian thesis is established. The idea of "it" and "incorporation" is equally examined; we argued that the ontology of "it" (depersonalization) in Menkiti's worldview negate traditional African society communal relationship tied to the living, the dead (ancestors) and the unborn (future generations).

The idea that personhood has to be acquired or achieved by a person based on the conferment or narratives of the community or through the process of incorporation and not by the virtue of rationality or memory is an erroneous one, because, person is a person on the basis of his/her ontological values or moral worthiness cum intrinsic value that makes him/her different from any other thing (being). However, there are some things that the individual (person) have to acquire from the community, such as good habits (*Iwapele*), acceptable personality, solidarity and reciprocal obligations, but surely, he is still supposed to be free in order to do any of these. Despite my critiques and many other criticisms levied against Menkiti's communitarian idea by some philosophers, sociologist, perhaps, some anthropologists, this idea could still be regarded as a substantial communitarian template in traditional African society.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* 178

<sup>36</sup> Oyeshile, O.A. 2006. *Op cit.*

<sup>37</sup> Menkiti, I.A. 1984. *Op. cit.* 172

<sup>39</sup> Gyekye, K. 1997. *Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience*. New York: Oxford University Press

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