

THE METAPHYSISCS OF PERSONHOOD IN THE NSO WORLDVIEW

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Abstract: This article examines the metaphysical conception of personhood within the Nso worldview of the Cameroon Grassfields, and situates it within the broader discourse in African philosophy concerning being, becoming, and “communal ontology”. Generally speaking, “personhood” in Western philosophical traditions has come to be largely grounded in rationality, self-consciousness, and individual autonomy. This position has been reinforced by key figures in western philosophical tradition like John Locke, Immanuel Kant and Rene Descartes. On the contrary, African philosophical thought often views personhood as a relational and morally constituted status or achievement. Drawing on African communitarian philosophy, ethnographic literature, and indigenous metaphysical principles, the study looks at the ontological foundations that underlie Nso understandings of human existence. It argues that Nso metaphysics articulates a relational ontology in which “being” is grounded in “belongingness” through kinship, lineage, and ancestral continuity, while personhood is progressively realized through right moral conduct, ritual participation, and the fulfillment of one’s social responsibility. Central to this framework is the communitarian axiom *wir dze wir bi’ wir*, which captures the idea that personhood is realized only when one is in communion with others. The article examines the cosmology of the Nso, its political institutions, and moral structures and demonstrates how the Nso worldview reconciles the tension between ontological being and ethical becoming. The study contributes to African metaphysical discourse by offering a culturally grounded account of personhood that challenges individualist ontologies and affirms the relational dimensions of human existence.

Keywords: Personhood, African metaphysics, Nso cosmology, being and becoming, communitarianism, relational ontology, indigenous metaphysics.

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Introduction

The question of what it means to be a *person* has occupied a central place in both Western and African philosophical thought for a long time. Yet, while Western philosophy has often approached personhood through the prism of rationality, consciousness, and individual autonomy, African philosophy has tended to understand it within the context of community, moral participation, and relational being (Nwoye, A, 2017). As Wiredu, K. (2009) explains, In African metaphysical reflection, to be a person is not merely to possess certain biological or psychological attributes, but to *become* through engagement with others and with the moral order that sustains existence. Within this intellectual landscape, the Nso worldview offers a rich and interesting

conception of what it means to be human that is worthy of deeper consideration.

In classical Western thought, from Descartes to Locke and Kant, personhood has largely been tied to the capacity for rational self-awareness, consciousness, and moral autonomy. Descartes’ cogito (“I think, therefore I am”) situates being within the realm of individual consciousness. Locke’s notion of personal identity further emphasizes individuality, while Kant’s moral philosophy regards the person as an autonomous rational agent, an end in himself. These conceptions, while foundational in modern philosophy, have been critiqued by African thinkers for their “narrow” individualism and their neglect of the communal and spiritual dimensions of existence (Gyekye, 1997; Mbiti, 1969; Menkiti, 1984). For many African traditions, personhood is less a

given and more an achievement; as it only unfolds progressively through moral conduct, social integration, and participation in communal life.

The African debate on personhood has largely revolved around whether personhood is ascribed at birth or achieved through moral and social maturation. Ifeanyi Menkiti (1984) famously argues that in African thought, “*it is the community which defines the person as person, not some isolated static quality of rationality, will, or memory.*” In his view, a human being becomes a full person only by living according to the moral norms and expectations of the community. Kwame Gyekye (1997), while agreeing that community plays a crucial role, warns against an overly collectivist reading, emphasizing that personhood must also recognize the intrinsic dignity and potential of the individual. These discussions point to an important metaphysical tension at the heart of African ontology: *Is personhood a matter of being or of becoming?* Is it an ontological status possessed by virtue of existence, or a moral and communal state attained through life’s process?

The present article seeks to address the central question: What metaphysical conception of personhood underlies the Nso worldview, and how does it reconcile being and becoming within its ontological framework? In pursuing this question, the study aims to contribute to ongoing debates in African philosophy regarding the nature of personhood, the moral foundations of existence, and the interrelation between individual and community.

Conceptual and Philosophical Framework

Any inquiry into the metaphysics of personhood requires conceptual clarity regarding the central terms that constitute its discourse. Concepts such as *personhood*, *being*, and *becoming* carry significant ontological weight within African philosophy and must be carefully defined and distinguished to ease understanding.

To begin with, *personhood* in philosophy generally refers to the status of being a person, which includes questions about identity, moral agency, selfhood, and what it means to be human in a metaphysical sense. In Western philosophy, personhood is often approached through the lens of *individuality* and *rationality*. Thinkers such as Locke define a person as a “thinking intelligent being” capable of self-reflection and sustained consciousness (Locke, 1975). Kant associates personhood with moral autonomy, arguing that what makes one a person is the capacity to legislate moral law for oneself (Kant, 1996). These notions emphasize inherent attributes that individuals possess prior to or independent of their social context. The result is a conception of the person as a self-contained entity whose identity and moral worth are grounded in intrinsic capacities.

African philosophical thought, however, often proceeds from a different ontological starting point. Personhood is understood less as a static property and more as a *relational* and *developmental* process (Molefe, M, 2018). Ifeanyi Menkiti’s influential thesis asserts that personhood in African societies is acquired progressively through moral action and communal integration. In this view, a newborn is a human being but not yet a *person* in the fullest sense (Menkiti, I. A, 1984). Kwame Gyekye, while critiquing the strongest version of this claim, nonetheless affirms that African traditions place considerable emphasis on social connectedness and the cultivation of moral virtues as essential to the development of personal identity. Personhood, therefore, is not merely an ontological given but also a moral achievement.

In classical metaphysics, *being* refers to the fundamental nature of existence. It denotes what something is in its essence or core identity. Western philosophers from Aristotle to Heidegger have examined being as the foundation of all reality, sometimes treating it as a static, underlying substratum. In African thought, however, being is frequently conceived in relational terms. Mbiti’s well-known maxim “I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am” articulates a view of existence that is grounded in interconnectedness (Mbiti, J. S, 1969). In this dimension, being is meaningful not in isolation but in relation to others, to ancestors, to the community, and to the cosmic order. This relational ontology challenges the Western assumption that the self is first an isolated individual and only secondarily a social being.

Becoming, on the other hand, refers to the dynamic process through which individuals actualize their potential, develop their identity, and grow into fuller forms of existence. In philosophy, becoming is often contrasted with being: whereas being suggests stability and essence, becoming suggests movement, change, and transformation. In African metaphysical thought, however, becoming is not a threat to being but a complement to it. Existence is seen as inherently dynamic; one is always in the process of aligning oneself with the moral and spiritual rhythm of the cosmos (Mbiti, 2015). Rituals, rites of passage, and communal practices are therefore not merely cultural ceremonies but metaphysical mechanisms through which individuals are shaped into persons (Gyekye, 2022).

To frame this discussion within the broader field of philosophy, it is necessary to consider how personhood is theorized in comparative traditions. For instance, in process philosophy, such as that of Alfred North Whitehead, reality is understood as fundamentally dynamic and relational. Entities are defined by their interrelations and their continual becoming (Whitehead, 1978). While the metaphysical categories differ from African thought, the emphasis on relationality and dynamism offers a useful counterpart for interpreting African concepts. Similarly, existentialist thinkers such as Heidegger describe human existence as a project, a being-in-the-world that is always unfolding and never complete (Heidegger, 1962). These parallels demonstrate that the African metaphysical emphasis on becoming is not entirely foreign to global philosophical discourse, though it is uniquely grounded in communal and ancestral ontology.

The conceptual framework also requires clarity on what is meant by the communal dimension of personhood. In African metaphysics, community is not simply a collection of individuals but an ontological structure that precedes and shapes personal identity. The community includes not only the living but also the ancestors and the yet unborn. This triadic structure creates a temporal continuity through which personhood is transmitted, nurtured, and evaluated (Menkiti, 2019). The Nso, like many Grassfields societies, maintain elaborate systems of kinship, lineage, and ritual authority that reflect this metaphysical continuity.

The Ontological Foundations of Personhood in Nso

Understanding personhood in Nso thought requires beginning with the broader metaphysical framework within which human existence is situated. The Nso worldview articulates an ontology that is at once cosmological, relational, and moral. It does not

conceive of being as an isolated substance but as a dynamic participation in a layered and interdependent cosmic order. This worldview is deeply rooted in the social, spiritual, and political life of the Nso people of the Cameroon (Tsékénis, 2015).

At the foundation of Nso ontology lies a tripartite cosmological structure: the realm of visible human society, the world of spiritual powers (including ancestors and spirits), and the land itself as a living force. As Tsékénis (2015) observes in his analysis of Nso ritual and kingship, ancestors are not figures of the past but active agents who participate in shaping social order, regulating moral conduct, ensuring fertility, and sanctioning wrongdoing.

This cosmological structure also informs political institutions such as *Ngwerong* and *Ngiri*, the two powerful regulatory societies that act as custodians of social order, moral discipline, and political legitimacy. Argenti (2001) notes that these institutions operate not merely as political bodies but as ontological mediators: they embody the collective authority of ancestors and the community's moral expectations. *Ngwerong* enforces discipline, balances power, and ensures accountability, while *Ngiri* serves as a noble counterpole, embodying aristocratic lineage, moral wisdom, and ritual purity. Together, they institutionalize the metaphysical principle that being is inherently relational and that individual existence attains significance only through participation in communal structures that reflect the moral order of the cosmos.

This communally-grounded conception of being aligns closely with philosophical interpretations of African metaphysics. Iroegbu's (1995) theory of "being as belongingness" captures the intuition that existence is meaningful only within relational networks. For Iroegbu, belongingness is not accidental but constitutive of being; to be is to belong. This resonates deeply with Nso ontology, where the individual is always enfolded within kinship, lineage, and ancestral networks. The Nso expression that "one belongs before one becomes" reflects the prioritization of relational grounding over isolated individuality. In this respect, the Nso notion of being stands in clear contrast to Western metaphysical traditions—especially Cartesian and Lockean frameworks—that foreground individuality, self-possession, and internal consciousness as the basis of personhood.

Instead, the Nso view echoes the major communitarian positions in African philosophy. Menkiti (1984, 2004) argues that personhood is not given at birth but is gradually achieved through participation in communal life and adherence to moral norms. Similarly, Masolo (1994) asserts that African philosophical systems tend to conceive of existence as mutually dependent and dialogical, emphasizing interconnectedness rather than autonomy. While the Nso worldview does not reduce individuality to the collective, it conceptualizes the self as emerging from relations of kinship and moral engagement. In this setting, a human being becomes a person by living up to obligations that sustain the community, honor the ancestors, and maintain cosmic harmony.

Anthropological evidence reinforces this relational ontological grounding. Feldman-Savelsberg's (1999) work on Grassfields kinship structures demonstrates how reproduction, childrearing, and lineage organization reflect deeply communal understandings of identity. Children are not considered the private possessions of parents but belong to extended kin networks, lineage ancestors, and even the wider village. This ties directly to Nyamnjoh's (2002) famous observation that "a child is one person's only in the womb," emphasizing the dissolution of private ownership in favor

of collective identity. The communal claim over a child's identity is not merely social but metaphysical: it reflects the belief that the unfolding of human potential is embedded within and dependent on relationships that precede and exceed the individual.

Nyamnjoh's later work (2015) develops this into a broader philosophical theme of "incompleteness," arguing that African worldviews typically see beings as perpetually unfinished and dependent on convivial relationships for their flourishing. This concept of incompleteness parallels the Nso view that human existence is dynamic and that the fullness of being is realized only through continual engagement with others. Being is not static but an ongoing process of alignment with communal norms, participation in ritual life, and adherence to the moral expectations embodied by the ancestors. In this sense, the metaphysics of the Nso mirrors the ontology of becoming articulated by African philosophers such as Menkiti and Masolo: existence is always in motion toward greater integration, moral maturity, and relational fulfillment.

Personhood as Becoming in Light of *Wir dze wir bi' wir*

The dynamic notion of becoming in Nso metaphysics finds one of its most powerful philosophical articulations in Godfrey B. Tangwa's communitarian axiom *wir dze wir bi' wir*, often translated as "a person is a person through others" or "one's humanity is realized only in communion with others." Although the phrase echoes the more widely known Southern African concept of *ubuntu*, Tangwa (1996, 2000, 2004) grounds it specifically within the existential and moral experience of the Grassfields peoples, of which the Nso are a central component. In this worldview, the self is not an isolated metaphysical substance but a relationally achieved reality, and the process of becoming a full person unfolds only within a community whose moral and social ties constitute the very framework of existence.

As established earlier, Nso ontology does not treat personhood as an innate or static attribute but as a gradual ontological accomplishment shaped by communal participation, moral cultivation, and ritual integration. The axiom *wir dze wir bi' wir* captures this relational ontology succinctly: one grows into personhood by actively participating in the moral, spiritual, and emotional life of the community. This aligns strongly with Menkiti's (2004) maximalist thesis that personhood is something one becomes, but Tangwa adds empirical specificity by grounding this claim in the lived ontology of the Grassfields.

According to Tangwa (2004), communal belonging is not merely a social descriptor but an ontological condition. To exist as a human being—to *be*—is already to be embedded in communal networks. Yet this initial being is incomplete until one undergoes the processes of becoming that define mature social existence. These include demonstrating empathy, fulfilling obligations, contributing to the wellbeing of others, and participating in the rituals that sustain communal harmony (Tangwa, 2004). Becoming is inherently ethical and relational, not merely developmental. This reinforces the Nso idea that moral vitality and social harmony are constitutive elements of full personhood.

When viewed from the vintage point of *wir dze wir bi' wir*, the metaphysics of becoming in Nso thought takes on an explicitly dialogical character. Tangwa (1996) also emphasizes the ecological and holistic implications of this principle, arguing that the African

conception of personhood resists radical anthropocentrism by embedding humans within a broader network that includes ancestors, unborn generations, and even non-human entities. This understanding is compatible with the Nso metaphysical structure, in which ancestors and spiritual forces are active participants in the community's life.

Tangwa's communitarian ontology resolves the tension between being and becoming by showing that being contains the seed of relationality, while becoming is the maturation of this relational essence. In other words, Being provides the ontological ground via birth, lineage while becoming constitutes the moral-spiritual unfolding of that ground. In Nso thought, as in Tangwa's formulation, one is born a human being but must become a person. Personhood therefore resides not in ontology alone but in relational praxis, in the lived expression of one's connectivity to others.

Philosophical Implications of the Nso Notion of Personhood

The metaphysical structure of the Nso worldview carries profound philosophical implications for understanding personhood, moral responsibility, and the very meaning of human existence.

The first philosophical implication has to do with the nature of being as relational participation, which directly challenges the individualist assumptions dominant in Western metaphysics. Nso ontology resonates with African philosophical traditions that describe being not as an isolated substance but as *belongingness*; what Iroegbu (1995) terms "being-as-belonging." Within this framework, the metaphysical structure of reality is not constituted by atomic individuals but by interconnected layers of existence embedded within kinship, lineage, and ancestral forces. This aligns with Menkiti's (1984) postulation that "the community defines the person," meaning that ontological identity is conferred not a priori but through integration into a community.

The second implication concerns the dynamic and processual nature of personhood, which in Nso thought is neither static nor automatically guaranteed by birth. Personhood is a status that must be actualized through moral comportment, social participation, and alignment with the cosmic order. This contrasts with the Western substance metaphysics that conceptualizes personhood as an intrinsic property of rational beings. For the Nso, as for many African cultures, personhood is something one *grows into*, a becoming grounded in ethical maturity and demonstrated through one's contributions to social harmony. This processual view affirms the insights of Menkiti (2004), who distinguishes between the "minimal" human being and the "maximal" person, and of Wiredu (1980), who argues that African conceptions of personhood exhibit both descriptive and normative dimensions.

Within the Nso worldview, this dynamic conception is closely tied to the notion that moral participation determines the degree of one's humanity. Individuals who violate moral norms either through exhibiting antisocial behavior, disrespect for elders, or sacrilegious actions risk diminishing their personhood in the eyes of the community. Conversely, through virtuous action, generosity, adherence to tradition, and service to communal well-being, one ascends into fuller personhood. Such a conception parallels Nyamnjoh's (2015) account of *incompleteness*, where humans are perpetually evolving beings whose identities are co-constructed through convivial relations.

The fourth implication concerns the primacy of moral order as a condition of existence. In Nso thought, morality is the very ground of being. To exist meaningfully is to participate in moral relationships that sustain community, harmony, and cosmic balance. The institutions of Ngwerong and Ngiri, for instance, function not only as political bodies but also as metaphysical guardians of moral order. Their authority is grounded in the belief that social harmony reflects cosmic equilibrium; thus, violations of communal norms are treated as disruptions of the cosmic order itself. This perspective echoes Masolo's (1994) argument that African moral systems are inseparable from metaphysical commitments to relational harmony and communal flourishing.

The Nso understanding of moral order also reveals a distributed conception of responsibility. Because personhood is relationally grounded, moral obligations are inherently social rather than merely individualistic. One's well-being is inseparable from the well-being of others, a view that aligns with Nyamnjoh's (2002) observation that Cameroonian societies interpret moral agency through the lens of "domestication and interdependence." The moral self is therefore co-constituted by communal expectations, ancestral presence, and social roles, which redefines responsibility as a shared, relational, and participatory enterprise.

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