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Understanding gender identities in an African communitarian world view

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In African philosophical literature, and especially in Afro-communitarianism, there are discussions about the value of the relationship an individual has with her respective community. By community, reference is made to the metaphysical holistic view of community which includes all beings in nature. But since the article deals with gender, which is a social construction, most of the arguments appeal to a narrower version of community, that of human beings. Therefore, discussions about "value" refer to the value that is given to the relationship that surpasses any individual value, and it applies or appeals to human beings. One implication of this understanding and the prioritisation of the relationship is that identity is something that is conferred by this sort of relationship. In this article, we argue that this way of understanding "identity" from an Afro-communitarian world view has something to offer in understanding or conceptualising gender(ed) identity(ies). The assumption is that gender identity will be understood as socially conferred and most importantly, one that takes community as essential.

Introduction

Gender issues are at the heart of academic and political discourse. These issues range from analytical work on understanding the meaning of gender to normative concerns about violence and discrimination against people with certain gender identities. The philosophical literature on the concept of gender identity includes but is not limited to the dispositional account by Jennifer McKitrick (2015), where gender is a disposition to behave in a particular way. There is the performative account by Judith Butler (2002), where gender is constructed through repetitive acts and their effects. The self-identification account by Talia Bettcher (2009) is where gender is a matter of how one identifies oneself. The norm relevance account by Katherine Jenkins (2016; 2018) has gender as a matter of relevant norms that define one's identity. Most of the accounts just listed are from the Western tradition and so have metaphysical foundations supported by that tradition. Thus, we assume that they are driven by individualistic views dominant in the West, where the individual is primary and the community secondary. To this extent, we seek to do analytical work on gender by appealing to metaphysical foundations supported by an African cultural world view. However, in so doing, we will not focus on debates about the existence of gender, rather we assume that there is such a thing as gender in the African cultural context, and so the task is to simply understand what it is.

In African literature, there are some attempts to understand gender from an African cultural world view. However, most of their arguments tend to be about the relationships between people of different genders or the experiences of individuals as gendered individuals (Bakare-Yusuf 2003; Oyowe and Yurkivska 2014; Manzini 2018). There is not much that has been written on understanding the concept of gender. For instance, Oyeronke Oyewumi (2005) questions how gender identities such as "man" and "woman" have been imposed and reconstructed in African cultures through colonialism. Another scholar, Amadiume (1987; 2005) traces the development of a gender ideology

that subordinates women to the assimilation and imposition of Western forms of patriarchy through colonialism and religion. She also traces a patriarchal ideology to the misrepresentation of African matriarchal cultures as patriarchal by Eurocentric scholars. Furthermore, Nkiru Nzegwu (2004), agreeing with Oyewumi's arguments, states that there is an imposition of Western metaphysical categories of gender on African cultures that has led to the distortion of how certain concepts are understood. She gives an example of gender identities, "man" or "woman" and how their meanings are rooted in the Western cultural tradition where they have been defined to be hierarchical and in opposition to each other. Nzegwu (2004) argues that this conceptualisation is foreign to the African cultural world view where genders were complimentary. What is common among all these scholars is the need to understand gender from an African cultural world view, but as pointed out above, there is a lack of deeper engagement with the concept itself. In this article, while assuming the existence of gender, we seek to provide an account of gendered identities (interchangeable with gender identity). That is, we seek to understand what defines gender identity. More importantly, we appeal to metaphysical resources that we believe are consistent with the African cultural world view.

The article aligns itself with debates on determinants of gender identity. That is, whether gendered identities can be conceptualised as innate, socially constructed, or self-chosen, based on various factors. The conceptualisation of gender identity as innate locates gender in some biological features such as hormones, chromosomes, etc. (Zhu and Cai 2006). Some early feminist writers such as Simone de Beauvoir (1973) made an outright rejection of biological gender, arguing that a person is neither born gendered nor destined to be gendered, but that gender is acquired through socialisation. Similarly, Oyewumi (2005) has characterised gender as a social construct, rejecting biology as destiny. For Oyewumi (2005), gender is social and not natural; it does not exist independent of human beings and is a product of socialisation. This means that there must be a time, a people and a place that began this ideology. However, gender as a social construct could equally imply that gender is solely defined by the community and conferred onto the individual, or that gender is self-chosen, a choice made independent of the community. This implies two radical positions: the community-based identity vis-à-vis individual-based identity. We approach this article from a moderate position, a view of gender that is inclusive of aspects of both individual agency and social belonging.

With inclusivity in mind, the main claim is that gender identity is essentially defined by community. A simplistic standard version of the argument is that gender identity is essentially defined by norms, and norms are essentially defined by the community, therefore, gender identity is essentially defined by the community.

To explore these ideas, the article is structured as follows: we start by discussing identity as a product of the community. We appeal to Molefe's (2017) conception of personhood as personal identity. Molefe does not discuss gendered identities, but we apply his views to the discussion. Following this, we look at how gendered identities may be defined. We adopt Jenkins' (2018) norm relevancy account of gender to show that gender is defined by norms, and by appealing to Menkiti (1984), we argue that norms are defined by the community. The conclusion is that gender is essentially defined by the community. Nonetheless, since individuals learn norms as they participate in the life of the community, part of the learning process accounts for the adoption of gender (gendered) identities. We look at how individuals adopt gender identity by appealing to the process of maturation. In the last section, we discuss some possible objections and a response, followed by a conclusion.

Relationality vis-à-vis identity

In African philosophical literature, discussions surrounding the relationship between the individual and the community are framed as debates under individualism and communitarianism (Menkiti 1984; 2004; Gyekye 1987; Matolino 2009). By individualism, reference is made to the elevation of the interests of the individual above the interests of the community. The elevation of the interests of the individual above those of the community tracks certain features that individuals possess with the presumption that they impart them with intrinsic value or accord them moral worth or dignity

(Toscano 2011; Molefe 2019). Similarly, Darwall (1977), in a distinction between appraisal and recognition respect, argues that there is a respect that individuals have because of certain features they possess. He calls this recognition respect. Examples of these capacities or features include rationality, autonomy, will, etc. Furthermore, since these features are innate and valuable, individuals may be said to have intrinsic and/or inherent value (Korsgaard 1983). The point that we are making is that the individual is the primary concern in all this such that the conceptualisation of the "self" is atomistic or separates the individual from the community. One implication on identity, and gender identity, is that the gendered identities that individuals possess are products of individual choice, or are self-chosen.[1] This may not be a helpful metaphysical presentation of individualism vis-à-vis identity, but it is enough to ground certain assumptions and claims we make and distinguish our view from these claims.[2]

On the other hand, communitarianism emphasises the relationship between the individual and the community and the interests of the community remain a significant force. Following Dennis Masolo's (2004) distinction between Afro-communitarianism and Western communitarianism, we have limited ourselves to Afro-communitarianism or what may be called communitarianism in the African cultural context (Menkiti 1984).[3] Under Afro-communitarianism, the interests of the community are primary to the interests of the individual. The value is in the relationship an individual has with her community. In African philosophical literature, the word "community" is a loose term and has been fleshed out more broadly, and narrowly. Broadly, under a "holistic metaphysical view of reality", it refers to all beings in a material world, physical and spiritual (Mbiti 1970; Behrens 2014). Under this view, these beings form a community in the sense that they do not exist as separate entities, but are interconnected or in solidarity with each other. According to Benezet Bujo (1998), there is harmony between human beings and non-human beings. Tangwa (2004) expresses this (positive) harmony as interdependence and (peaceful) co-existence of all beings in the material world.[4] On the other hand, a narrow view of community is anthropocentric. It focuses on a community of living human beings. This is the view of the community we are concerned with given our conceptualisation of gender as a social construct. However, this is not to close off the discussion on gender that includes spiritual beings, where being gendered would mean being inhabited by other gendered spiritual beings (Nyanzi 2014). Nonetheless, central to this (anthropocentric) view of community is relationality and its implications on identity. Identity (under this view) is relational in that it tracks relational selves. However, since relationality could be whole or partial, we limit our argument to how communities partially define the individual, even while remaining an essential feature of identity. To provide a discussion of this view, we now turn to Molefe's (2019) presentation of personhood as personal identity.

Personhood as personal identity

In African philosophy, scholars such as Kwasi Wiredu, Kwame Gyekye, Edwin Etieyibo and Motsamai Molefe have discussed various accounts of personhood. Some of the conceptions

1 Part of this notion of identity would include Sigmund Freud's ([1924] 1995) psychoanalytic theory which focuses on individual's construction of their identity through their family members. Freud's version is both individualistic and heavily relies on innate (biological) capacities even when it incorporates one's familial relations. In this article, we abandon this theory for its primary focus on individuals other than society.

2 Our views on "identity" are limited to a specific form of identity. We are not referring to identity in terms of the "persistence question", as discussed in most Western metaphysical literature, and about features that make the individual the same individual over time (Parfit 1982). Instead, we are looking at how persons understand their beingness in terms of what they are in relation to other human beings. This is a more general sense of what makes the "self" or how a person understands one's own being. Furthermore, we take this identity as an ontological category, in the same way the self is conceptualised, and not a mere language game. The wording might be convoluted at this stage, but it will be clear as we offer our explanation of the concept below.

3 With the concept "Western", we have in mind philosophical traditions that have been commonly associated with Western philosophy. At the same time, we are aware of the recent debates to problematise the use of the word "Western", given that it is loosely defined as it does not truly define what can be called or counts as "Western" other than assumptions of "white supremacy" and "cultural appropriation" (for a discussion on this, see Allais 2016). Nonetheless, by Western communitarianism, we refer to a tradition that seeks a balance between individual and communal interests.

4 The words "positive" and "peaceful" refer to a kind of harmony or coexistence that is not driven by fear or negative factors, but one where individuals willingly choose to live with other beings.

include, but are not limited to, the transcendental notion of personhood, the capacity-based notion of personhood, the metaphysical notion of personhood, the body or situated-embodied notion of personhood, personhood as personal identity and the social-notion view of personhood (Menkiti 1984, 2004; Behrens 2013; Oyowe 2013; 2014; 2018; Etieyibo 2020; Molefe 2020). The article focuses on personhood as personal identity as presented by Molefe.

Personhood as personal identity has been classified by Molefe as a "metaphysical" account of personhood because it deals with the nature of persons. However, the main feature of this view of personhood is that it focuses on the relational nature of identity. That is, it presents a conceptualisation of the self or identity to be beyond an individual qua individual by incorporating the community as an essential feature of that identity. But to explain how the community defines an individual, or how it is essential to individual identity, there is a certain notion of community that one must endorse. Molefe is not clear on what notion of community he has in mind given that there are various notions of community in the African philosophical literature. For instance, the earliest debate found in the literature pointed out two notions: radical communitarianism, attributed to scholars such as Tempels (1959), Mbiti (1970), and Menkiti (1984; 2004); and moderate communitarianism, attributed to Gyekye (Wiredu and Gyekye 1992). Briefly, under radical communitarianism, the community has ontological and epistemological primacy over individuals. These individuals see the "self" as a product of the community, such that any rights they have are secondary to duties (Menkiti 1984). Concerning identity, the community wholly defines the individual. On the other hand, moderate communitarians attempt a balance between rights and duties in a bid to provide an account of an individual who is not sacrificed at the altar of the community (Gyekye 1992; Metz 2012; Molefe 2017). In terms of identity, the community partially defines the individual. A notion that comes close to our conception of gender is moderate communitarianism. However, we do not follow these notions because they focus more on rights than identity.

A more helpful distinction for conceptualising identity comes from Ikuenobe's (2018, 214) distinction between a "collectivist" community and a "constituted" community, which, for Ikuenobe, is "a simple aggregation of all individuals who choose voluntarily to be part of the community" (see also Menkiti 1984). On the other hand, a collectivist community

> is a complex organic set of individuals, relationships, values, cultural traditions, interests, and obligations that transcend individuals or their simple addition…it is not reducible simply to the individuals or elements that make it up because it is not the simple addition of the individuals and institution…*it has transcendent social and moral norms, values, and relationships that mould individuals' identity, character, conception of good, choices, preferences, and actions* (Ikuenobe 2018, 214; emphasis added).

From this, we see that not only does the community have ontological primacy over the individual, but it is necessary for an individual's identity. This is the view of the community we adopt for this article, but in our discussion of gendered identities, we have a qualified acceptance, that is, we leave room for some version of individual freedom concerning identity formation (Menkiti 1984; 2004). The basic idea is that if norms, values and relationships transcend individuals themselves, then underlying such a view is a community that is ontologically prior to individuals. The community is essential for gender identity but has a partial role, given that individuals do not lose their individuality. The community does not force gender identities onto individuals, but individuals are part of the process of defining their identity. By individuality, we have in mind one's uniqueness as a separate being, even when embedded in a social group (Masolo 2004; Eze 2010). There is an element of agency attached to this notion in such a way that we conceive individuals not as passive observers, but as active agents who are constantly acting in the world with other agents. The person is best thought of as a human agent who acts and interacts in a particular cultural and historical context with other human beings. This is not just a mere expression of the contingent requirement of personhood, rather, as Julian Hughes notes, "it is constitutive of persons that *they must act on and, in the world*" (Hughes and Beatty 2013, 338; emphasis added; see also Hughes 2001).

Therefore, when it comes to Molefe's (2017; 2019) view of personhood as personal identity, we believe that this is the notion of community that he implicitly endorses. Molefe's endorsement

of this notion of community can be attributed to the statement he makes as adopted from Menkiti (1984, 171), who states that

> [t]he African view of man [sic] denies that persons can be defined by focusing on this or that physical or psychological characteristic of the lone individual. Rather, man [sic] is defined by reference to the environing community. As John Mbiti notes, the African view of the person can be summed up in this statement: I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am.

In light of the above, Molefe (2017) notes a distinction between the Western and African views of a "person". In our discussion of individualism, we distance ourselves from this conception. Our focus is on the African cultural world view, and under this view, a person is defined with reference to the community. Molefe notes that this view of personhood should not be confused with the descriptive view which picks out ontological properties that make up a human being, be it spiritual, physical, or quasi-physical (Wiredu and Gyekye 1992; Kaphagawani 2004; Etieyibo 2020). Instead, he argues that personhood as personal identity focuses on how individuals define themselves in the context of the larger group. For Molefe, Menkiti's reference to the "environing community" means that he is after a distinct conception of personhood because such a community is not an ontological feature of human beings. What Menkiti provides here is a process of socialisation, a process that makes individuals the kinds of persons they are as they take on the norms of their society. This is a process through which the community defines individuals, which is a view consistent with the notion of community discussed earlier. But an important part of the views discussed here is that one's personal identity results from one's embeddedness in a community, or that one's identity depends on and results from one's beingness with others (Menkiti 2004; Louw 2004; Molefe 2017). In Menkiti's (1984, 172; emphasis added) words: "…the sense of *self-identity* which the individual comes to possess cannot be made sense of except by reference to these collective facts". Collective facts here refer to the individual's social or communal realities.

This view that identity depends on one's beingness with others means that identity is a product of the social group. However, as Wiredu (2008) notes, to say that identity is a product of the social group does not mean that the community defines identity in an authoritarian way by imposing identities on individuals. Rather, individuals have a role to play as they are the ones who adopt communal identities, and they are part of how these identities are formed. For Wiredu (2008), this happens when individuals take on certain communal norms. This is a logic we adopt in our conception of gender identity, where gendered identities are defined by norms, and individuals acquire them as they identify with those norms. Therefore, when we argue that identity is a product of the social group, it should be understood in this interactive way, as an interaction between an individual and the community. Nonetheless, in this interaction, the community is essential and has ontological primacy. According to Mbiti (1970, 141) "the community makes the individual" and points to the assertion that an individual makes through his dictum, "I am because we are, since we are, therefore, I am" (Mbiti 1970, 141; see also Metz 2007; 2012). What the dictum illustrates is the idea that the individual acknowledges their identity and existence as dependent on others and that they are a product of the community. The phrases "I am" and "we are" are loaded phrases that express "individual's beingness" and "corporate beingness" respectively, and they illustrate how an individual depends on the community. The same understanding is also expressed in the famous Nguni phrase *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, which means a person is a person through other people (Shutte 1990; Ramose 2002). This illustrates the interdependence and co-existence of human beings. It highlights the importance of the relationships that a person has with others in the realisation or actualisation of one's full humanity (Mbiti 1970; Shutte 1990; Tutu 1999; Ramose 2002). Therefore, although what this shows is that the individual defines themself through others, this definition is not a once-off, but a process that is constantly affirming the presence of others (Nyamnjoh 2021). We will come back to this view of identity formation below.

A claim about the primacy of the community

What the above discussion highlights are two main claims that underly a conception of personhood

as personal identity. One is a claim about the primacy of the community, and the other is a claim about identity. To start with the first, the basic assumption under this view of personhood is that the community is primary, and individuals are secondary. This is what is highlighted under a collectivist view of community. However, some scholars like Oyowe argue against the primacy of the community such that this objection would have implications on how gender is defined because it underlies a different conception of the relationship between an individual and the community. According to Oyowe (2014, 334),

> [t]he idea of the collective as "producing" the individual implicates a questionable idea of community, i.e. the idea of community as a natural formation. It is the idea of the community as some fixed, unchangeable entity existing independently of the individual…It is questionable because for the community to create or produce the individual, its existence must be independent of and prior to the existence of individual human beings.

Oyowe's criticism in general touches on the notions of community highlighted above. It is about how the relationship between an individual and the community should be understood, and for t it is individuals who make up the community. We take this objection to rest on a somewhat more distinct notion of community than the one he objects to. In other words, the objection ignores that there are different senses of "community" as shown in Menkiti (1984), Gyekye (1997) and Ikuenobe's (2018) views. We take the objection as advancing (in Ikuenobe's terms) a "constituted" view of the community and use that to critique the "collectivist" view of the community, and we consider this to be a questionable approach. More importantly, Oyowe's objection has not provided sufficient justification to show that a collectivist view of community is impossible. On the contrary, the objection merely assumes that there is only one possible notion of the community.

Nonetheless, a proper response requires an argument that demonstrates how the community ought to be considered as having ontological primacy. According to Gyekye (1992), part of the meaning of the primacy of the community is that individuals are born into a community and cannot exist and develop outside the community. To support this statement, Gyekye cites some Akan maxims. One the maxims states that "when a person descends from heaven, he descends into a human society", or *onipa firi soro besi a, obesi onipa kurom* (Wiredu and Gyekye 1992, 105). That is, one's life begins in the context of the community, and by implication, it is sustained by the community. Another maxim is that "one tree does not make a forest", which, according to Gyekye, illustrates the self-insufficiency of the individual (Wiredu and Gyekye 1992). For Gyekye (1992), it is incomprehensible to think of an individual as prior to the community because that would require that the individual exists and develops on their own. However, individuals are not self-sufficient, and so the existence of a lone individual is almost impossible. Individuals are born in a community of others such that "others" are part of how individuals define their identities, goals and aspirations (Gbadegesin 1991; Metz 2007). The community is more of the beginning and end of the individual. Other scholars such as Okot p'Bitek (1998) express this view in strong terms by stating that "humans are not free, and because they are not born free, they are everywhere in chains", i.e. the chains of the community (Etieyibo 2020, 61). Even upon death, persons are never free, their spirits are still venerated by the community as ancestors, which illustrates an endless cycle of human beings moving from one kind of community to another (Mbiti 1970; Menkiti 1984; 2004). Rianna Oelofsen (2018) shares the same view and argues that an analysis of the individual in the African context cannot ignore the community. She likens this to Martin Heidegger's (1996) "being" and the "world" where the two are inseparable. The main outcome from this discussion is that the community has ontological primacy over individuals, and this leads us to the second claim about identity.

A claim about identity

Moving on to the second claim about identity formation, we work under the assumption that the primacy of the community provides a strong basis for viewing identity as a product of the community. Molefe (2019) notes that Mbiti's dictum cited above alludes to the role of the community in making and producing individual identity. The dictum ought to be understood as a modus ponens (MP)

form of argument. MPs are arguments of the form: *if a then b, given a, therefore b*, where *a* is the antecedent and *b* is a consequent. The "I" is a consequent of the "we" which is the antecedent. The dictum understood as an identity statement shows that meaning that the "I" only obtains when there is a "we" (Nyirenda 2019). Thus, while the statement could indicate the primacy of the community, it is also an identity statement. For Menkiti, the "I" is a statement about the "self", but he has a qualified view of the self as expressed in the statement, "…in the absence of others, no grounds exist for a claim regarding the individual's standing as a person. *The notion at work here is the notion of an extended self*" (Menkiti 2004, 324; emphasis added). Thus, the "I" is not about individuals under individualism, but individuals under communitarianism. It is a "relational I", expressed as an extended or relational self.

To make sense of the notion of extended self, one may look at its counterpart notion, that of minimal self, or just referred to as "the self". Attempts have been made and no agreement exists among scholars about the definition of the self. Richard Heersmink (2020), basing it on an explanation adopted from Shaun Gallagher (2000), provides a view of the self from a biological perspective. Heersmink takes the self as that which has subject-hood and agent-hood without the inclusion of all the unessential features such as thinking or reflection. Subject-hood refers to a sense of awareness and a claim of ownership of one's own experience, whereas agent-hood means awareness of oneself as the source of the action (James 1890; Heersmink 2020). Suppose a person decides to move their leg, such a person would regard themself as the source of the action and at the same time having felt the leg move. The former is agent-hood and the latter is subject-hood. Lack of agent-hood would mean a scenario where one's leg is made to move by an external agent. Underlying the idea of the self here in terms of subject-hood and agent-hood is immediate experience at the biological level, or consciousness characterised by some brain processes such as proprioception, perception and action (Heersmink 2020). Thus, the notion of the extended self which Menkiti (1984) refers to should be understood as building onto this understanding of the (minimal) self. It is about how things that are considered external to the individual are perceived and identified as part of the self. One example to illustrate this point is to think of how a robotic leg on a person who had their leg amputated is identified and treated as a normal biological leg. The harm done to the leg is felt as harm done to any other part of the body (Heersmink 2020). Similarly, in thinking about the community as part of the extended self, there is an intuition here to take on board. One would argue that the community which as described by Molefe (2019) is not an actual ontological descriptive feature of a human being, but constitutes one's beingness or identity as an extension of the self.

Thus, individuals understand their beingness to be embedded in and supported by the relationships they have with others, which is a view that makes the relationship invaluable. Hence, it is rational that the promotion of a positive view of one's identity is the promotion of the relationship. Alternatively, one's actions as well as the actions of others that have negative or positive effects on the relationship would have a corresponding effect on the individual. It is not surprising (therefore) that scholars such as Metz (2007, 111), in articulating a principle of right action in the African cultural context under ubuntu, states that "an action is right just insofar as it produces harmony and reduces discord; an act is wrong to the extent that it fails to develop community". In this regard, right actions are those that promote harmony, and according to Desmond Tutu (1999), "harmony" is the *summon bonum*, the greatest good. In addition, harm done to the relationship or others is harm done to oneself. This harm affects an individual's well-being, destinies, goals, or aspirations that are shared among members of the community. For Wiredu (2008), this expresses the view that the African cultural world view is a system of reciprocity and interdependence such that individuals understand their well-being as connected to others. Reciprocity is expressed in the promotion of the common good. The subversion of this good is the subversion of one's well-being. This is normative talk, but it underlies a metaphysical view of an extended sense of self or identity, a logic that was expressed by the robotic leg example.

Thus, identity in the African cultural world view is social, and understanding this identity requires the recognition of others. The sociality of persons is also illustrated by Metz's idea of shared identity in his presentation of ubuntu. For Metz, identity is shared in the sense that the individual sees themself as part of the group and the group sees the individual as part of it (Metz 2007). But this

should not be interpreted as a mere formal identity, as in how individuals consider themselves to be part of a company. This is a deeper sense of identity about how one sees oneself. The community is inseparable from one's sense of self. It is to this extent that the community is essential to the identity of individuals, where that identity is expressed (as Menkiti claims) through the notion of extended self (Mbiti 1970; Menkiti 1984). Again, this does not entail loss of individuality, because the idea of the self as relational presupposes relational autonomy. Thus, when making decisions, individuals under this world view would prefer consulting with others as opposed to making independent individual decisions (Christman 2004; Ikuenobe 2018; Akpa-Inyang and Chima 2021). In short, we have been arguing for a world view that endorses a person as a social being, and this social beingness is consistent with relational autonomy. A discussion on autonomy shows that a person is not passive but acts on the world as an autonomous agent, but this happens by recognising and negotiating with others. This has implications on gender, such that, it is a partially conferred identity, one that includes aspects of the community and the individual. This implication forms part of the views we discuss below.

A norm-relevancy account of gender(ed) identities

The intuition adopted from the above discussion is that the community defines individual identity. We have presented the above discussion to show the logic through which gender identity ought to be understood. In this part of the section, we discuss gendered identities. Broadly, we understand gender identity, or gendered identities, to refer to identities through which individuals interact with each other. To show how the community defines gendered identities, we appeal to Jenkins' (2018) norm relevancy account of gender (see below). We only present the account briefly and with some careful modification because Jenkins might not have intended to present her account as we do here, nor apply it to the African cultural context. We adopt Jenkins' (2018) theory because it discusses the concept of gender and the relationship between gender and norms. We consider norms to be central to how identities are framed in the African cultural world view. In this world view, norms are important as they specify how individuals ought to interact with each other in a community (Gheaus 2023). The view that norms are products of the community aligns with our conception of gender (identities) as a social construct. Since the community essentially defines and licenses norms, by implication, it licenses gendered identities. Furthermore, norms, like any other social construct, are subject to change and modification such that gendered identities which we conceive to be essentially defined by norms have the potential to acquire new meaning. At the same time, this change could result in the creation of new identities. This is the sense we use for the fluidity of identities within a community. At the same time, norms also differ from one society to another, such that the way gendered identities are framed would vary across communities. A person with a gendered identity "woman" in Malawi would be recognised under a different identity in South Africa. For instance, a biologically male person, Tiwonge Chimbalanga from Malawi, lived in exile in South Africa for fear of imprisonment because Tiwonge was recognised as having a gendered identity "man" in Malawi, contrary to her perception of identity as a woman (Gevisser 2014). Thus, society dictates the norms that define gender identity, a move that would have positive or negative implications for others. In our conception, we are not concerned with the normative implication of recognition of these identities, our focus is on how gendered identities are defined and consequently provide a picture of how they may be adopted by individuals.

According to Jenkins' (2016, 410) norm relevancy account, given the subject, S, and gender identity, X, it would be stated that,

> S has a gender identity of X iff S's internal "map" is formed to guide someone classed as a member of X gender through the social and material realities that are, in that context, characteristic of Xs as a class.

Jenkins' (2018) notion is based on a distinction between gender as an identity and gender as a class. Gender classes refer to human groups such as men or women. But what makes them belong to a class is that members in the group share certain social and material realities. The social and material realities refer to the norms of the community. Thus, gender identity is formed by individuals based on

norms that define classes. Since many norms define a class, only a selected few relevant norms are important for an individual's gender identity. The identification of relevant norms is an individual's responsibility. It is left to the individuals' discretion to define their gender, which sometimes may or may not align with classes. However, we do not agree with Jenkins' (2018) distinction of "gender as class" and "gender as identity" because of how classes are defined. The distinction is (adopted from and) influenced by her response to Sally Haslanger's (2012) view of gender, where women are subordinated based on presumed bodily features for reproduction, and men are defined based on privilege and presumed bodily features for reproduction. In the African cultural world view, this conception of gender is questionable given that gender is presumed to be fluid and complimentary (Amadiume 1987; 2005; Nzegwu 2004; Oelofsen 2018). Thus, women occupy significant and privileged positions just like men (Momoh 2000). The notions of privilege and subordination do not rest on gender or bodily features, but on seniority as the organising principle in most African societies (Oyewumi 1997; 2005; Momoh 2000). This idea then suggests that a woman never remains in a permanently subordinate position (Nzegwu 2004). It is for this reason that we do not consider Jenkins' (2018) discussion of classes, instead, we will only adopt her argument in its simplistic form.

For Jenkins (2016; 2018), gender identity is defined by norms. But not all norms, only those that are relevant to the person. That is, even if there are norms associated with women, not all such norms can be relevant to a particular woman, only a selected subset would be relevant. A person with a gender identity "woman" would only take a "significant subset of the norms associated with women and not a greater subset of another gender" (Jenkins 2018, 731). This means that identity is not only formed with norms associated with women, but also includes some that belong to another gender. Having norms that belong to another gender highlights the nature of relevancy expressed as "norm compliance" and "norm violation" (Jenkins 2018, 731). To understand these two notions, consider this example: Suppose there is a woman who does not shave bodily hair on her legs and belongs to a society where it is socially accepted for women not to have bodily hair. Nonetheless, she remains conscious of her hairy legs. For Jenkins (2018, 731), the woman in question is violating a norm about a woman's body in her society, and "this awareness of norm violating nature...is something the woman can only have...in experiencing her behaviour in relation to norms associated with women...that legs should be hairless". Thus, even if she does not respect the norm, it is relevant to how she identifies herself. It forms part of how she sees herself as separate from other women and even men as she navigates the social space. On the contrary, to be norm-compliant means that one adopts the norms that are associated with one's identity. In this manner, one acts in ways that are commonly associated with the social group as definitive of a particular gender. Therefore, for one to have a certain gender, it means an active process where one is consciously aware of the norms that are relevant, whether in compliance or violation. But as stated, identity is defined by a larger subset of norms that a person complies with and a smaller subset (if there are any) of norms one violates (Jenkins 2016; 2018). What we have presented so far is a brief account of Jenkins's views, but which has important implications and underlies the view of gender we have in mind, a view that gendered identities are defined by norms, norms are products of the community, and therefore, the community defines gendered identities. We ignore a question about the nature of norms, that is, whether the norms are sex-based norms or not. We believe communities define norms differently, but what makes them definitive of gender is that they account for gendered identities, whatever these may be (Gheaus 2023).

Normativity and identity acquisition

An important point we adopt from above is the social nature of gendered identities (Oyewumi 2005). The sociality of gendered identities is framed as relying on norms, and so cannot exist independent of human societies. The very existence of gendered identities requires some social acceptance. Central to how gendered identities are accepted in a community depends on acceptable norms that define them. This means a (communal) modification to norms would also modify these identities, and a rejection of norms would also mean a rejection of identities that spring from them. According to Menkiti (1984), the community is the prescriber and catalyst of norms. That is, the community creates the norms and offers the space for individuals to learn and act out these norms.

Since it creates the norms, the community must (or is obligated to) ensure that individuals live by the norms, because it licenses the norms. One implication this view has on gendered identities is that these identities as defined by norms are products of the community, which creates and licenses them. Therefore, what this means is that individuals qua individuals are not responsible for creating identities. This is a view that would be supported by those who see gendered identities as self-chosen, but that an individual's responsibility lies in how these identities are adopted. While Jenkins (2018) does not account for how these norms are adopted, one may attempt to fill this gap by appealing to psychological, social, cognitive theories such as one by Bandura (1999). Under this view, individuals, especially at an early age, learn by modelling observable behaviour (Bussey and Bandura 1999). Under social and cognitive theories, children watch and adopt behaviours that are rewarded and avoid behaviours that are punished. And gender identity is a product of modelling gendered behaviours. According to Bandura (1999), children learn gendered behaviour from their parents. However, implicit in this account is the emphasis on the nuclear family as the model for gender. In an African cultural world view, one would argue that the behaviours children adopt go beyond a nuclear family setup, because they are behaviours that are generally accepted by the society as a whole because of the emphasis on extended family (Wiredu 2008). African proverbs such as *mwana wa nzako ngwako yemwe* ("your neighbour's child is your child" or "it takes a village to raise a child") illustrate the communal responsibility in raising a child, and under social learning theory, this implies the existence of a child whose model is the community. Thus, concerning gendered behaviour, the focus then is on communally sanctioned and modelled gendered behaviour.

While social cognitive theories offer a good explanation for behaviour modelling and the construction of gender identity, there is a questionable implicit assumption of the link between observable behaviour and norms. We believe these two can come apart because not all behaviours that children observe and learn are norm-based nor correspond to norms. Our view is that a proper account of gender identity would account for gendered behaviours and norms that justify this behaviour. That is, it would be inadequate to argue that gender identity is defined by observable behaviour, which begs the question about the nature of behaviour if there is no explicit assumption that the behaviour is based on certain norms. Furthermore, social cognitive theories cannot adequately account for the norm-violating nature of certain behaviours and how they influence the gender identity of children. Again, consider the example of a woman who refuses to shave her body hair (Jenkins 2018). One would wonder how this behaviour would be modelled and influence a child's gender identity. It is not clear to us how a behaviour that is acted out by a parent but linked to a norm should be interpreted and modelled by a child as a violation. Thus, the behaviour of the mother not shaving her body hair can be modelled by her child as one that belongs to women and not as a norm-violated behaviour that (actually) belongs to men in the community in question. Because of these complications, we appeal to the simple intuition of norms as definitive of gender identity and separate our views from social cognitive theories.

Moving on, to argue that individuals adopt relevant norms defined by their community which are definitive of gendered identities presupposes a capacity for an individual to choose and comprehend what is relevant to themself. This presupposes a rational ability and autonomy, which we have endorsed as relational autonomy.[5] With these capacities, individuals can identify with relevant norms as they interact with others and develop an identity that sets them as distinct from others. Thus, as we have argued. individuality and autonomy are never lost in this cultural setup regardless of the primacy of the community. We envision a community that respects individual's separateness and uniqueness. Nonetheless, this individuality presupposes an extended "self". Thus, individuals never lose their individuality such that even if they take on an identity that is shared by others, they

5 This is another important point that separates our conception from most conceptions such as the social cognitive theory because it does not offer an account of the place of autonomy. We assume that social learning theories as developed and empirically verified in the West tend to be predominantly individualistic. They do show the importance of the community, but either as instrumental and not having higher value as in African communitarianism, or as shown at the beginning, this could just be an instance of Western communitarianism which is not about the ontological primacy of the community, but a balance between the individual and the community. If these views hold any sort of truth, then the metaphysical foundation guiding our conception and other conceptions is different.

still have a unique and separate identity. Again, this identity takes the communal facets as essential such that it is expressed in relational ways. However, the nature of uniqueness can be accounted for by appealing to norms. For example, there could be two individuals who define themselves as "men", but they see themselves as different men given the differences with respect to relevant norms. Sharing or subscribing to the identity "man" only shows that most norms that they each identify with are those that define the identity of a man. Furthermore, the choice of relevant norms, whether as norm-compliant or norm violator is made by recognising and negotiating with others. Individuals are in this community, other-regarding and understanding their autonomous choices to have a bearing on others (Ikuenobe 2018; Molefe 2019). Given this view, the implication is that we reject from our conception a view that there can be a gender identity that completely rises above the shared community norms. Individuals cannot completely live a life outside the norms, nor elevate their interests above the expected norms of the community. The point is that individuals usually work with norms that they find in a community. They adopt what is available and can even be part of the process of modifying them, but only by deliberating with others. An identity that is formed above the norms of society would be rejected by the community. We do not argue for whether such rejection is justified or not. Our point is that the logical consequence of the community being the author of norms is that it will see as a threat anything that goes outside these norms.

One last point to make is to present a process of socialisation. The above discussion has highlighted the primacy of community in defining gendered identities and the place of the individual in identity acquisition by appealing to individuality and relational autonomy. We have not yet accounted for a process that can explain how the identity is adopted. The above discussion was to establish the underlying assumption to this process that gender identity as defined by norms does not mean that individuals passively adopt the gendered identities in ways that they are wholly conferred onto individuals, but rather that the adoption recognises one's individuality and respects an individual's choice concerning relevant norms. Furthermore, we are not arguing for a descriptive account where communities follow this process, but we seek to demonstrate the sense in which we see gender identity to be partially defined by community. We have in mind Menkiti's (1984) views on personhood, especially the process of maturation. This process accounts for one of the ways individuals learn the norms of their societies. According to Menkiti (1984), from the point of birth until death, individuals go through various rites of passage and carry out certain obligations. During this long process, they are taught societal norms, including gendered norms that are definitive of gendered identities. Thus, the process of maturation sees the community as an important part of an individual life and is actively involved in shaping the lives of individuals. The community creates the norms and offers the space for individuals to articulate them. As a result, identities are defined by communal norms and those that are not, or are defined differently by other communities, are often rejected. But as pointed out above, our conception does not state that communities should force identities on individuals, rather individuals merely choose what is made available to them. If the choices are not enough, individuals become part of modifying the norms such that new interpretations of gendered identities are formed. Here, the process of maturation points to the growth of individuals and how they come to acquire knowledge of the norms of the community. Central to this process is how they learn and adopt relevant norms as they carry out obligations and participate in rites of passage. Since norms are attached to gendered identities, the norms that individuals adopt entail the kind of identities that individuals have adopted such that when individuals express and act on these norms, the community can see their identities and treat them accordingly. This is the sense we have in mind when we take the community to define gender identities and how individuals play a role in adopting them.

In summary, the above discussion highlights a standard form argument. The argument is that if gender identity is defined by norms, as illustrated by Jenkins (2018), and norms are defined by the community, according to Menkiti (1984), then gender identity is defined by the community. However, we have shown that the primacy of the community in defining gender identity is not a one-way process, i.e. one that starts with the community and ends with individuals. Rather, there is an interaction of both the individual and the community, even when individuals understand that this interaction does not ignore that the community has primacy. We have argued that the community

does respect an individual's individuality and autonomy as expressed in relational terms. However, before we conclude, we must address an objection to one of the assumptions we have made in the article.

Objections and conclusion

Given the above presentation about norms and how they define gendered identities, one argument that may be presented as a challenge to our claim is the view that we need to account for gendered identities that result from a clash between the community and the individual. This objection is about children who are said to be gendered and who are treated as gendered by the community, and when such an identity clashes with what the child chooses at a later stage in life. Part of the objection is that the community assigns an identity to a child, but given our view that individuals adopt the identity based on relevant norms, the identity assigned by the community may be different from the identity an individual chooses. Therefore, it is not clear the extent to which this community-assigned identity becomes foundational to an individual's identity given the primacy of community discussed in the article. The precursor to this argument is children's inability to learn the norms of society at the early stages of their development because they have not yet developed cognitive capacities such as rationality. The assumption is that at this early stage, the child has not yet developed the ability to make independent choices about their own gendered identity (see Barnes 2022 for a similar discussion about people with cognitive disorders). This would mean, according to the objection, that at that early age, any gender identity the child is presumed to possess is a community-conferred identity. Thus, there is nothing in our conception that explains what happens (at a later stage) to this assigned identity. This leads to a minor dilemma, that is, either the child abandons a communally assigned identity, which would mean undermining the primacy of the community; or on the other hand, the child adopts a communally assigned gendered identity, which leads to gender incongruence or dissonance. This is the disparity between one's perception of one's gender identity and community-assigned identity, and double consciousness about one's gender (Aronson 1969; Brivic 2002).

One way of responding to this argument is to simply state that the individual has no choice but to continue with an assigned gendered identity because individual interests cannot be elevated above those of the community. However, this response assumes passive individuals who have no choice or space to articulate their values. At the same time, this failure to articulate one's values assumes that the notion of relevance would mean nothing for individuals because it would not matter what norms are relevant for individuals in adopting a gendered identity since their identity is fixed anyway. However, a proper response to the above objection is that we do not endorse imposed identities. We have argued for the place of relational autonomy and individuality in the adoption of gender identities, therefore, when it comes to children (especially babies), if they cannot make decisions, they do not have a gender identity. They are merely participants in different gender roles or assigned gender roles, some of which may be specific to certain genders, depending on the kind of community in question. However, their carrying out of obligations does not mean that they have an identity. This response is a logical consequence of the notion of relevance. Individuals have a gender identity with relevant norms. Children whose rationality has not developed cannot articulate what norms are relevant to them. Therefore, what is referred to as communally assigned identity is not identity in the true sense of the word, but mere role playing. It is not surprising that in the above demonstration of how individuals come to learn their identities, we argued that gender identities come to be formed as individuals begin to identify with norms that are relevant to them. The objection therefore fails to account for some crucial features of our conception.

In conclusion, in this article, we have argued for a way of understanding gender from conceptions of identity already present in African cultures. The aim is to show that there are resources in the African context that are a valuable contribution to understanding gender identity. We started by presenting a conception of personhood as personal identity as provided by Molefe and then used this conception to argue for a conception of gendered identities. The argument is that the community is an essential part of identity and by extension confers identity upon individuals. We argued that individuals are products of the community. We adopted Jenkins' norm relevancy account which

appeals to norms in the conceptualisation of gender identity. We then argued that if gender identity is defined by norms, and norms are defined by the community, then gender identity is defined or (and by extension) conferred by the community. Since the community licenses norms, it also licenses gendered identities. To show how individuals come to learn the norms of society and adopt gendered identities, we appealed to the process of maturation as provided by Menkiti.

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