Paths to African personhood and identity in the diasporas: the case for reburial of African enslaved ancestors[1]

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Abstract

Recently, there has been confusion regarding the personality of people of African descent living in the West. This identity crisis is an issue rooted in African and Africana history. However, recent questions asked by newer generations of Africans in the diasporas warrant a re-thinking of this problem. In view of this, I set out in this essay with three objectives. First, I demonstrate that the personhood and identity of the descendants of African slaves have been compromised by the process of the enslavement of their ancestors. I argue that the present identity crisis in the diasporas is denotative of this problem. Two, I show that the identity crisis is ontological rather than linguistic. I argue that the yearning of the descendants to express their native selfhood is an ontological struggle to reclaim their personhood in Africa and this is a nausea carried over from their enslaved ancestors. As a corollary, I show that the enslaved ancestors are still in slavery even in death, and that they lack the recognition – 'African ancestors'. Three, I explore the corpus of African philosophy to illustrate the various paths through which African enslaved ancestors and their descendants can gain authentic African personhood and identity. Particularly, I demonstrate that the bones of the African enslaved ancestors have to be exhumed and brought to Africa for reburial into freedom to enable them to become African ancestors thereby gaining posthumous African personhood and identity. The import of this is to enable their descendants to begin their own process of gaining African personhood and identity, which begins with proper burying of their own forebears, the enslaved ancestors. Finally, I ground this discourse on the matrix of land and man in African philosophy.

Keywords: African Identity, African Personhood, African Diasporas, Slavery, Land.

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Introduction

> *For most of my life, all the way to about my sophomore years in college, I struggled with identity, keeping up with American culture while trying to maintain a grasp of my Ethiopian heritage. It has been difficult... It took me a long time to be able to confidently figure out "what I am" or "where I'm from"... For most of my life I was confused. I never knew which box to check. This seems like a stupid dilemma to have, but it is something I struggled with throughout my life until I reach[ed] about 20... Therefore whenever I am asked, where I am from, it's difficult to answer* [EthiopianAmericanGirl 2012].

This is a confession of an Ethiopian lady who was born and brought up in the United States of America. Is she an Ethiopian-American, as she prefers to call herself or an African-American, as others prefer to call her? Is she just an Ethiopian, American or African?

In a recent development, Terry Collier [2013] wrote a letter to the Washington Post's editor denouncing the term 'African American' used as a means of identification for people of African descent. The debate over the identification of people of African descent living in America has been ongoing for centuries, but the debate suddenly enlivened passive concerns after the United States Census Bureau announced in 2013 that it would substitute the term 'Negro' with 'African American' in the list of options used to identify 'people of color' in the 2014 census. Following the Bureau's announcement, the community of people of African descent experienced mixed or confused emotions. Some supported the Bureau's proposal, others identified with Collier's arguments. Still, some remained passive. Collier proposed that the Bureau should use the term 'American of African descent' instead of 'African American' [ibid.]. His argument was that 'American of African descent' puts emphasis on his nationality, whereas 'African American' place emphasis on his ancestry.

This is an issue of identity crisis and it is directly interlinked with the question of personhood. Who are the Africans in the diasporas? Are they purely Africans or Africans plus something else? Maria Lloyd and Boyce Watkins [2013] argue that the identity crisis among African people living in the diasporas could be attributed to 'the community´s failure to pass down our history'. This line of argument raises the stakes of the debate. What community? What is the nature of the community? What history does the African-American community have to pass down? Do all segments of the community have a history to pass down?

In the meantime, in the midst of this confusion, the African Union has initiated a project called Door of Return (DoR), spearheaded by Nigeria, Ghana and Zimbabwe, to encourage descendants of African slaves to return and reconnect to the Homeland in all its ramifications [Warami 2019]. On 24th August 2017 the DoR was first opened in Badagry, Lagos, Nigeria. With an address to the United Nations by the Nigerian Permanent Representative Prof. Tijjani Bande, year 2019 was set aside to mark the beginning of the decade of voluntary return for the descendants of African slaves to the African Homeland [Warami 2019]. This project raises further questions: to where will the descendants of African slaves return, how are they to return, and why must they return? These questions interlace with the question of identity and

personhood raised in the earlier paragraphs. This article addresses these questions in a comprehensive way in order to provide a theoretical foundation to the DoR project and to resolve the identity issues with which descendants of African slaves are faced.

Meanwhile, it is pertinent I explain how some concepts are employed here. I use the term 'descendant' to interchange with the longer phrase 'descendants of African enslaved ancestors'. The same thing goes for the term 'ancestor' that I use interchangeably with the long phrase 'African enslaved ancestor'. I also use the term 'enslaver' instead of the regular term 'slave master'; for the purpose of withering down the sense of superiority that seems to go with the regularly used term and to neutralize the damning effect the latter term would have on the African reader with enslavement history.

Ontological Analysis of the Existential Condition of African Being in the Diasporas

The identity of the modern African is imposed on him at birth by the various existential conditions which predicate his existence. These conditions include the fact of colonialism, imperialism, neo-colonialism, and slavery. Kwame Nkrumah [1964] avers that the postcolonial African is a product of triple heritage – the traditional, the Christian-Western, and Arab-Islamic – which coexist uneasily in conflict with one another. Nkrumah's observation, it should be noted, is limited to those who survived the scourge of slavery. The Africans who were shipped away into slavery in the Caribbean, Americas and elsewhere had more complex and traumatic experiences in identity change and deformation. These deformatory experiences have been widely documented by historians and anthropologists. As a consequence of these experiences, the Africans, and by extension, their children, who were taken captive by the enslavers, had lost their identity, or at least had their identity compromised. The Africans who were shipped away into enslavement in Europe and America *"were separated from their families, denied their language, denied their culture, were brutally dehumanized, reduced to non-humans and hence eventually lost their real mode of existence"* [Owosho 2013: 162]. Okeke notes that:

> *Without a peculiar culture, a people have no identity in the eyes of the world. And without identity, a people simply do not exist. Existence in this context does not mean subsistence, it means having a place in world history* [Okeke 2017: 5-6].

The loss of identity is even worse and more acute in the population of the descendants than it was among the original slaves. The descendants of African enslaved ancestors today are disconnected, in every sense, from the African personhood, identity and essence. Their problem is even more complicated due to the fact that their brethren in the African Homeland are as equally alienated as they. However, the descendants in the Americas and elsewhere have far

more transcending problems than their brethren in the Homeland; in the sense that, the descendants and their enslaved ancestors are still living in some form of captivity. This experience for the ancestors is different from that of their descendants. For the African enslaved ancestors, their captivity is due to the fact that their bones are still buried in American and European soil, in the land of their enslavement. Being buried in the alien soil, in the land of the enslavors, means that the African enslaved ancestors are still in enslavement. This is extrapolated in this Annang aphorism: *agwo akpaha k' ifụ̀n asuk aba k' ifụ̀n ke mibọ́họ́ke ebuuk anye k' udi mme ette amọ́*, a person who dies in slavery is still in slavery unless his body is buried in his ancestral land. The land of the enslavor is an extension of the enslavor himself. The enslavor is tied to his land by spirit. By having his bones buried in his captors' land, the enslaved ancestor is still subject to his captor in death.

In the conclusion, I have articulated the matrix of land in relation to African personhood. I have explained how the African cultural ontology is constitutive of metaphysical models that explain the co-extension of man and land. Many philosophers have provided analyses to show the matrix between land and man within the framework of ontology. There are existential connexions between land and man.

> *Lands are not dead things but are animated with life-force, potency of life, and they are as active as the life-forms that live in them, upon whom we depend. He, who destroys land, destroys life-force, the source of life and existence itself* [Ibanga 2018: 125].

There is an active connection between personhood, identity and the land where one's umbilical cord is buried. There is also active connection between personhood, identity and the land where one's ancestor is buried.

Joseph and Jacob, according to the Bible, understood the matrix of land and personhood. This is the reason why they instructed their descendants to liberate their bones from Egyptian soil (their enslavers' land) in the year of their freedom [Genesis 49:29-31; 50:25-26]. It was also for the freedom and emancipation of the bones and spirit of their ancestors that the liberated Jews took the bones of their ancestors with them in their march into freedom [Exodus 13:17-19 cf. Genesis 50:1-14; Joshua 24:32]. Joseph, in particular, had recognized that as long as his bones were in Egyptian soil, he was still in captivity and enslavement; and that he could only be truly free if his bones were buried in his homeland, in the land where his people lived. Joseph recognized this truth in spite of his ascendancy as the Prime Minister of Egypt. In the light of this reasoning, I argue that by having his bones in the enslavers' land, the African enslaved ancestor is still held bound in captivity even in death. As long as their bones are buried in alien soil, they remain captives and slaves. *Agwo akpaha k' ifụ̀n asuk aba k' ifụ̀n ke mibọ́họ́ ke ebuuk anye k' udi mme ette amọ́*.

What about the descendants of African enslaved ancestors? I have noted that the matrix of slavery for the ancestors is different from that of their descendants. For the descendants who are alive today, their slave-complex finds expression in three windows which points to the fact of their alienation from the African personhood. These windows are cultural, mental and spiritual. From the cultural perspective, my argument is that the adoption of the cultural forms

of the enslavers as a mode of expressing his being, as the basis of his experience and means of his epistemic processing only goes to show the depth of the captivity in which the descendants have descended. The adoption of the alien culture of the enslaver is due to the acceptance of the negative labels cast on his identity and the disillusionment of his castrated involvement in the superficial affairs of the enslavers' community. The descendant believes that by being allowed to enjoy limited freedom in the enslavers' abode, he is now as free as the 'free' enslaver. Although the enslaver had become a slave to his evil passions by virtue of the act of enslaving the other, therefore, he too is not free indeed [Mandela 1995].

The disillusionment is being reinforced by the political ascendancy of some black leaders that culminated in the election and re-election of Barrack Obama as the 44th President of the United States of America. In the next section, I am duty bound to show the castratuousness, temporarity and limitedness of the 'freedom' sprinkled on the descendants. However, it is important to note that there are scholars who argue to the contrary. For example, Muyiwa Falaiye, in his theory of cultural adaptationism, argues that the cultural abandonment attitude of the descendants in favour of alien cultural forms of the enslavers is natural and adaptative, and a necessary evil in the matrix of their experiences (see Owosho [2014]). Okeke [2017] argues that the descendants are more steeped in cultural righteousness than their free brethren in the African Homeland. Both scholars suggest that the descendants should be allowed to continue in their cultural perverted ways. My argument is that "cultural adaptation" of the descendants reflects the psychopathic contours of the enslavement. I am not denying 'cultural exchange'; but I am saying the descendants' process of the adaptation is diseased.

The second window in which the slave-complex of the descendant expresses itself is mental. The mental dimension of the African enslavement is seen in his attitude of the mind towards his Homeland, that is, Africa. This is evident in his disconnective attitude in reasoning and cognitive processes regarding the state of his Homeland. For example, the descendants have not done much about the state of the Homestead. They mostly invest their resources in countries outside Africa, and prefer to go for holiday in other European cities rather than in Africa. Moreover, their attitude towards the leadership problem in the African Homeland is abysmal. The descendants have not questioned the negative diplomatic attitude of their host countries towards the Homeland. The overwhelming majority of them does not have homes, investments and friends in the African Homeland. Almost all of them do not belong to cultural, economic, social, political and study associations founded by their brethren and operational, perhaps solely, within the continent. These are some of the expressions of the negative mental attitude of the descendants towards their Homeland. However, it should be noted that this is due to the negative labelling of the continent by their enslavers and the acceptance of the blackmail by the descendants. Such naive acceptance was made possible by a process which involves three phases. It is a process I prefer to call 'multiple castrations'.

The first phase of the process involves the use of torture and intimidation to do what is called "taming". That is, to forcefully subject the individual to their commands by weakening his neuron, motor and other physical cognitive elements thereby rendering him weak, ill, reactive and permanently disabled in all ramifications. This action would now trigger negative mutational changes in the individual and the offspring. A recent study has demonstrated how

these negative environmental factors can weaken the brain of a person and that of his descendants [Wijeakumar *et al* 2019]. In the second phase, the individual is brainwashed – by feeding him with lies and falsehoods about himself and his heritage. This comes in forms such as labelling using such effective tools as Western religion (which condemns all his cultural forms as fetish). Already, the descendant, at stage one, has lost his cognitive abilities through the negative mutations he inherited. At this stage it is easy to aid him forget his history, already severally the distorted, thereby washing away his memories. He would have no memory to transfer to his offspring, that is, no history to pass on, except perhaps what Okeke [2017] calls 'ICABODDED history', that is, an emasculated history, a history without glory, a history without heroes. In the third phase, the individual is indoctrinated with the concepts, doctrines and values of the subjugator. This comes in forms such as labelling using such effective pedagogical tools as Europeanized theology and Westernized philosophy as well as ICHABODDED history and Western-biased science. Since he had already lost his cognitive abilities in the first phase, in the second phase his mind has been washed empty, the gullible, but hungry, mind accepts anything without questioning especially because he had been 'tamed'. Having come to accept the indoctrinations as forms of knowledge (especially where there was a little 'miracle' pulled at him), he passed the same onto his descendants.

These are the phases the enslaved ancestors underwent, and the extension or effects of which the descendants have inherited under heavy bombardment of multiple mutations and genetic mistranscriptions. The descendants are to this extent deformed in identity and alienated from the African personhood. Now, since the descendants have been held captive in mind as well as in body, they turn their antennas towards Europe and America. Since their minds have been held captive, they pay no real attention to African problems. On the contrary, they consider the ontology and epistemologies of their Homeland as inferior. With the slightest opportunity, the descendants want to substitute the ontology of their Homeland with the alien ontology of the enslavers. They are neither critical towards Euro-American nor African ontological systems and their epistemological processes. All they want is change for the sake of change because for them the Euro-American civilization process is superior hence it is the right model for all people. There are historical as well as cultural disconnections between the descendants and their Homeland.

The third window is spiritual. Historically, Africans and Europeans view God in significantly differential ways. Absolute materialism and atheism are alien to the traditional African. This does not imply that materialism and atheism are not forms of spirituality; but they are European forms of spirituality. The African is a religious man and woman. Africans live religion in their lives and express their spirituality in objects and life endeavours [Mbiti 1969]. African spirituality enables him to understand his place in nature, and so he was always very close to it. His religion was a veneration of nature – viewed as expression of *abot* (creator or God).

Now, with the displacement of the African from his environment by the enslavers, he is by that act disconnected from his spiritual essence. The captured African was now tortured and taken to a hostile land that was both alien and demoralising to him and her. The African was coerced to become hostile to his religion. This led to many of them losing grip of their original spiritual essence. Although some of them took their religion with them to fields of slave labour, the

spiritual lack was evident because of their disconnection with the land where their umbilical cords were buried. Spirituality of the African was only possible in the context of his land. The Afe Nkuku Ekpo and Ufok Mmwommo that he served enhanced his spirituality by linking him directly with the world of the spirit [Francis 2016a]. However, with the territorial mislocation the enslaved suffered, all these enabling factors were disabled and disconnected. The enslaved African was now without his God. He became an atheist. He was later forced to pay tribute to alien gods in their slave camps. By paying homage to an unknown god that neither his father/mother nor he knew, the captured African entered into spiritual bondage. This condition therefore undermined his capabilities to transcend into the 'world of forms'.

The spiritual enslavement which the African enslaved ancestors entered has continued until today even among their descendants. On the one hand, the ancestors are in spiritual enslavement by the fact of their bones held captive in their enslavers' land. This is extrapolated in this Annang aphorism: *agwo akpaha k' ifịn asuk aba k' ifịn ke mibọhọke ebuuk anye k' udi mme ette amọ*, a person who dies in slavery is still in slavery unless his body is buried in his ancestral land. This means that the enslaved ancestors can only be redeemed from slavery if and only if their bones are interred in their ancestral land – the African soil. On the other hand, by failing to register the mark of their footprints in their Homeland the descendants failed to established spiritual contact with the land. Their inability to do this is a result of the yoke of slave-complex that burdens them. The failure of the descendants to come home in order to pay homage to their cultural institutions, walk barefooted on its soil, hence becoming one in spirit with their Homeland, is a result of the enslavement in which they were held.

The analysis above represents the dialectical process in which the African enslaved ancestors and their descendants have entered, and the ontological condition in which they are found. The analysis above only shows the dimensions to which slavery has eaten into the ontological fibres of the descendants. However, I observe that a similar picture can be painted about the Africans at home, particularly those who live in urban centres. But the difference is that while the African at home is suffering from bad faith and self-deception, the descendants are suffering from mental poisoning and the attendant infections which the direct impact of the physical enslavement had caused. The effect of this problem on the identity of the African in the diasporas cannot be overemphasized. For example, the arguments that attended Terry Collier's letter indicate that some descendants of African enslaved ancestors no longer see themselves as Africans but popularly as Americans and Black Americans, or at best, as African-Americans. None of these labels connotes or denotes African identity. Rather, they suggest identity crisis which the fact of the enslavement has triggered. A superficial look at this issue may cause this problem to appear trivial, but a deeper look at the problem reveals the ontological crisis going on within the beings of the descendants of African enslaved ancestors.

Hole in the Heart of Diaspora African

There is a hole in the heart of the descendant of the African enslaved ancestor. In cardiology, we are told that a hole in the heart is symptomatized by the discomfiture of the creature. Every now and then the individual is under the threat of system collapse. There are contours of anxiety in his eyes, which threaten to expose the caricature of his being. He is feeling some nausea and emptiness within his being. There is a hole in the being of the descendant of the African enslaved ancestor. The descendant feels this discomfiture, this nausea, this emptiness. He feels that there is something missing in his being. He feels that there is a gap in his being. He feels in his being what Jean-Paul Sartre [1992: 21] describes as a coil of emptiness – 'nothingness [that] lies coiled in the heart of being like a worm'. He feels that his humanity is incomplete and can only be completed on African soil. He longs to come home. Edward Blyden [2007: 8] confirmed this to the American audience about 130 years ago when he wrote: The African enslaved ancestor and his descendant 'is by an uncontrollable impulse feeling after a congenial atmosphere which his nature tells him he can find only in Africa'. This emotion has been inherited by the descendants. There is this vague 'nausea of ontological incompleteness' ingrained in his being. This 'ontological incompleteness' remains as long as he remains on and in alien soil.

All organisms, especially of animal nature, usually feel this 'nausea of incompleteness' when they are displaced from their pool of collective origin. The Jews experienced this nausea of ontological incompleteness until they were united with the territory that they believed was destined as their homeland. A bird in one's hand experiences this nausea of ontological incompleteness until it returns to flock with its kind. The animals in the zoo are experiencing this nausea of ontological incompleteness until they are freed to unite with their kind living under an atmosphere of freedom. The pool of collective origin for the Africans in the diasporas is the vast territory called Africa, it is the African community founded on the free African soil. Every African who wanders abroad holds the picture of the Homeland in his heart. And those Africans in the diasporas who have never seen the Homeland before want to feel it with their hands. Barack Obama [2006: 53-4] says, 'I remember the first time I took Michelle to Kenya, shortly before we were married. As an African American, Michelle was bursting with excitement about the idea of visiting the continent of her ancestors'. Michelle Obama, the former First Lady of the United States, experienced this nausea of ontological incompleteness – and she did not stop experiencing it until she visited Kenya and walked on its soil barefooted. This nausea of ontological incompleteness varies among a people. The nausea of ontological incompleteness of slaves is higher than that of their descendants which in turn is higher than that of migrants which in turn is higher than that of their offspring. It is important to note that this nausea of ontological incompleteness does not go away even in death. Suicide cannot do away with it. In death the spirit of the enslaved and/or that of his descendants does not rest in peace. He is troubled from every side and finds himself in restlessness in what is supposed to be a peaceful rest. But when his bones are exhumed and reburied in the land of his fore-fathers, in the land where his umbilical cord is buried; his spirit comes in agreement with the land. His

bones suddenly come alive because the land has accepted him, the clan has accepted him. He is now free.

It is a matter of fact that all enslaved people think about home at various points in their lives. The descendants of African enslaved ancestors in the Americas have a deep thirst and hunger for home. They feel that their humanity is incomplete and can only be completed on African soil. They long to come home. However, the descendant suppresses this nausea by diverting his attention to mundane things, but this only serves to cost him his humanity. It is at the pool of collective origin that the humanity of the African is fully realized. Blyden [2007] observed that those who suppress the inner impulses to come to Africa and be free, think they do so because they believe they are progressing in that country (although they are progressing in many respects), and kindled by the prospects and possibilities of land of their birth, makes him desire to remain and share in its future struggles and future glories. He further observed that among the descendants 'wails of slavery' were still heard. The wails of physical suffering have been exchanged for the groans of an intellectual, social, and ecclesiastical ostracism. But when the descendant makes up his mind to remain in the enslaver's territory, he has also made up his mind to remain in slavery. He surrenders his personhood, identity and freedom which he would have reclaimed in Africa. As long as he remains in the enslaver's land he is hampered in spirit, mind and body. He neither could rise up with spontaneous and inspiring power in his heart nor be able to stretch out his hand unto God. He feels something in him, his instinct points to it, but he cannot act out what he feels.

> *But, in Africa, he throws off his trammel. He finds the atmosphere a part of himself. His wings suddenly develop, and soar into an atmosphere of exhaustless truth for him. There he becomes a righteous man; there he returns to reason and faith* [Blyden 2007: 8].

This nausea of ontological incompleteness, the 'longing to attain self-conscious manhood', as W. E. B. Du Bois [1903: 11] puts it, is the quest for personhood and identity. The nausea of ontological incompleteness is also a symptom of a being in an identity crisis. The descendants are confused, not knowing what identity to accept as their own – is it American, European, African, Black, Afro, Negro, etc. Some had tried to combine identities – African American, Black American, Afro-Italian American, Afro-Chinese Japanese British, etc. In this condition therefore their souls vex and experience nausea which is characteristic of their ontological incompleteness. And from within his being, his vexed soul struggles within him in search of true identity in order to attain self-esteem. The descendant 'ever feels his two-ness, — an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder' [ibid].

Having experimented with identity combination to no avail, the soul within the descendant realizes that it is impossible to be both African and American at the same time. He realizes it got to be one of the many descriptions. But the soul is longing for authentic identity that is true to his nature – extending all the way to his ancestry in *eset* (antiquity). At this point the descendant realizes that he is not just a bundle of cells but an historical reality – carrying in the fibres of his being the cultural intelligence of his ancestry. He understands that his existence is

not a neutral phenomenon but a continuous interaction with his past. He realizes that 'the other' engages him on the basis his antecedents, his past, his historical identity.

His antecedents therefore constitute his identity, which in turns define his successes or failures. For this reason the Annang have an adage: ese *etoyo se ete ayen ake anam edep edia ke adan eno ayen,* there is a dialectical connexion between the manner with which a child is treated and his ancestral antecedents. This is so because the antecedent is now part and parcel of the present individual. This means that at the marketplace, 'the other' takes all your history into consideration. He interprets your actions and his reactions on the basis of your historical intelligence available to him. It is for this reason that 'the other' continuously digs into your history in order to get hold of your true identity. He compares what he has got with that of others, and tends to confirm societal stereotypes. 'The other' engages descendants of African enslaved ancestors basically as he would a slave or descendant of a slave – because that is how he appears to him, merely emancipated in his enslavement but not freed. 'The other' would not have engaged him as he would have engaged a free man. He engages him on the basis of his social status. The social status of the descendant defines the moral attitude of 'the other' towards him. 'The other' does not interact with him as an equal. But once the descendant throws off his yoke of slavery, goes home and identifies with his brethren, 'the other' would then treat him with respect because he now has a history and people who watch his back. He is now secured. 'The other' would now know that by dealing with him he is dealing with his entire ancestry. He is now cautious with him, and does not maltreat him.

But at the moment, the descendant is without history. He is disconnected from his ancestry by the fact of slavery. And as long as he remains in enslavement he is without identity. At the point of being inducted into slavery, the ancestor had lost his identity. This was signified by the change of name imposed on him by the enslavers. Jene Gutierrez [2016] notes that the enslavers were very particular and aggressive in attacking, defiling and altering African names 'in order to suppress and erase African identity'. The enslaved ancestor was now belonging, as were property, to another. Generally, slavery is a condition whereby a person becomes personal property of another person. The African enslaved ancestor could not identify with the ancestry of the enslaver because he belongs not there but was a bought property. In that condition, the enslaved ancestor had lost his personhood since he was now without ancestry. He could only have had his humanity and identity restored to him if either he was bought back by his clan or escaped from captivity back to his pool of collective origin. But the enslaved ancestor would have none of these things: he was merely emancipated in slavery like a prisoner released from the fetters in the prison yard without being cleared to go home. However, the descendants think they have identity in Africa, and they lay claim to it; but they do not actually possess it. Whatever identity they think they have in Africa is phantom identity. If the ancestors no longer had identity or heritage in Africa, they could leave none for their descendants. Now, the onus is on their descendants to take advantage of the Emancipation and free themselves, and their ancestors, from slavery forever.

At this juncture, I want to note that there are some descendants who claim 'pure' American identity without mixing it with African identity. They believe that their birth in the country of their enslavement had conferred upon them the enslavers' identity. The Annang adage says,

ebot amanake k' esa agwo akere 'te k' ide agwo, a goat born in human abode thinks he is human being. They conveniently identify themselves with the names of the enslavers, the very persons who enslaved their ancestors. Itibari Zulu [2017] has correctly pointed out that by wearing American and European names the African enslaved ancestors and their descendants are wearing the badge of the enslavement by their very names. Du Bois [1903: 11] notes that the 'American world – [is] a world which yields him no true self-consciousness'. They think they believe that because they were born in that country, could speak English and generally assimilate American cultures that they are now Americans. But you cannot become a member of another cultural community through slavery. As long as you have not returned to your native homeland, you remain in enslavement. It is after you have returned to your native land, your pool of collective origin, the African soil, that you have your personhood *vis-a-vis* identity restored to you by the community, thereby redeeming your dignity and humanity.

Also, there are those who may argue that the political ascendancy of President Barrack Obama had redeemed the dignity and humanity of the descendants. That is another way of looking back to the proverbial Egypt. Just like Barrack Obama, Joseph was the Prime Minister of the most powerful nation on earth [Genesis 41:39-44]. However, the Jews understood that political glory cannot redeem one's social identity as a slave or descendant of slave but only a return to one's original and native community can guarantee true redemption from slavery. The descendants of African enslaved ancestors should understand the metaphor of Alice Walker, in which the freed slave woman rather killed her children instead of allowing them to be taken as slaves. The message is clear: Africans living in captivity in the diasporas you cannot remain in enslavement forever, redeem yourselves!

Path to African Personhood and Identity, from Slavery

What does it mean to be free from slavery? What does freedom mean to a slave and a descendant of a slave? What paths can the slave and descendants of the slave take in order to attain freedom to the fullest extent and its ramifications, and by extension reclaim his personhood and identity? Is this sort of freedom an end in itself or a means to an end? In the preceding sections, I have discussed the different dimensions of slavery as it expresses itself in/among the descendants. I outlined the different dimensions to include cultural, mental and spiritual slavery. Freedom for the African enslaved ancestors and their descendants necessarily encompasses the three dimensions into which they had descended in their enslavement. This means that the enslaved must attain freedom in his cultural, mental and spiritual attitudes. Freedom from spiritual slavery is particularly essential for the enslaved. It is spiritual freedom that makes freedom from cultural and mental slaveries complete. Without it freedom from cultural and mental slavery is a kind of freedom but a hollow, a shadow of freedom. Freedom from slavery is ontological and extends to the being of his being, the self, his personhood, his

identity. Freedom for the enslaved and descendant of the enslaved is not an end in itself. The captive must move from slavery to freedom and through freedom to selfhood. The selfhood is defined through others – *I am because others are*. It is by constructing his selfhood in this way that one can attain African identity.

In this article, I have outlined the chronological stages to attainment of freedom and African personhood for the descendant. For the ancestor, I have maintained that he is in enslavement even in death. Hence, there is need for his descendants, or even his clan, to exhume his bones for reburial in the African soil. This is a necessary task for the descendants. It is also a task for the clan, Africa, to facilitate. The final resting place for the African enslaved ancestors, their descendants, and indeed every African at home or in the diasporas, is in Africa. For the descendant his freedom lies in this truth: he must return home to Africa. Freedom from slavery can only be achieved by returning to your native homeland. In fact, the humanity of an African slave or that of the descendant of an African enslaved ancestor is alienated from him by the fact of slavery. Hence, his humanity can only be fully activated and cultivated if he returns to the pool of collective origin. His humanity can only be fully realized if he is freed from slavery. Being free from slavery means returning home to one's original community and be absorbed by the community. This is what freedom means for the enslaved and their descendants. One derives one's personhood from the community and from one's community his identity.

The descendants have recognized this truth. Hence, their numbers have visited Africa at various times. But rather than paying a visit I think that they should first be freed. By visiting, the descendant indeed experiences nostalgic freedom, he experiences some pilgrimagic elevation – at this point his humanity suddenly comes alive within him. He feels suddenly raised back to life. Something in him undergoes changes, he is transfigured. He feels different from what he had known of himself. At this point his humanity comes to stare him in the face. His eyes open. He realizes that he is a human person. He realizes that he has history. He discovers his ancestry. He also realizes that he is not only a missing link of the ancestry but that the fact of slavery had kept him perpetually disconnected from his essence. However, he had discovered the truth: he is a human person, he has history, he descended from an ancestry, and he has brothers and sisters. He began to nurse feelings of pride in his heart. Finally, he returns to the diasporas with this new internal image. But these experiences are merely palliative to the visiting descendant. He could not strip himself of the garment of slavery. He merely went up to the mountaintop where he could set his eyes on his native homeland; but he could not set his foot on it, fall on it and kiss it. He could have taken a step further and remained there until the clan absorbed him.

Enslavement is always a violent process. It is the process of recreating a 'new' person who lacks dignity and identity. The 'new person' which slavery fostered out of the African enslaved ancestor was not actually a human person but an object for exploitation. Therefore, freedom from slavery would enable the enslaved and their descendants to be restored as human persons with definite identity. This process is not always physical rather it has a spiritual dimension. For this reason, freedom from slavery is incomplete until the spiritual aspect is incorporated. It is a process that involves rituals of cleansing and restoration. When the Jews came out of slavery in Egypt, the Bible tells us that Yaweh instructed Moses to lead them through the Red

Sea [Exodus 13:17-18]. The significance of crossing the Red Sea, according to the Bible, was to cleanse them before there were admitted into freedom in their homeland [I Corinthians 10:1-2]. The rituals of freedom from slavery vary from culture to culture. Rituals of freedom from slavery for African slaves and their descendants must follow the procedures available in any African indigenous culture.

For the ancestors, I have maintained that their bones must be exhumed and brought to Africa for reburial into freedom to enable them to become African ancestors. The enslaved ancestors lack the recognition 'African ancestors' because they are not part of African community, which is onto-triadic encompassing both the past, present and future people. The enslaved ancestors could not become African ancestors simply because they are dead; they have to be inducted into African community. Ramose [1999: 63-4] notes that 'not everyone is an ancestor simply because of death... only the initiated may become an ancestor'. The bones of the enslaved ancestors have to be repatriated for re-interment in Africa to enable them to gain freedom and become African ancestors. But when the bones have arrived African shores, there must not just be merely mass buried. The bones should be brought through a corridor of freedom, that is, DoR, based on the funeral procedures of any African indigenous culture. As the procession is passing through the corridor of freedom, an African traditional priest or monarch, clad in his full regalia, would then utter incantations declaring that those were African ancestors rescued from slavery, and urging the spirits of the clan to accept them and restore to them their place in the clan. Thereafter, each of the set of bones shall be given African names. The native naming is to enable the ancestors to acquire a place as persons in the African community because it is through name that one is linked to the community. Ifeanyi Menkiti [2004: 326] avers that naming 'begins the first phase of that special journey towards incorporated personhood via the community'. Once this is done, the African enslaved ancestors are now free, accepted and ready for reburial in African soil. This process is to enable them to join their peers as authentic ancestors and to take their seats in the minds and hearts of the living Africans. Once this process is carried out, it will export certain dynamics unto the descendants that would enable them to be gradually recognized as descendants of African persons. This in turn will help them begin their own process of gaining African personhood and identity, which begins with proper burying of their own forebears, the enslaved ancestors.

This process of gaining African personhood is not exactly the same for the descendants of African enslaved ancestors who are alive today. The descendants (the children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren and several remote others who descended from African enslaved ancestors) can only acquire unique African personhood and identity through the normal processes by which personhood and identity are acquired in the African contexts. I have opined that an individual derives his personhood from the community and from his community his identity. An individual is free to the extent that he is said to possess personhood. Let me demonstrate the implication this statement holds for the African enslaved ancestors and their descendants.

A number of African philosophers have written about what it means to be considered a person in the African context. Bernard Matolino [2008] opines that the concept of person is not merely a narrow restriction of human being as an isolated entity that can be comprehended on its own

independent of other variables. African philosophers maintain that African communities generally hold communitarian/communal views of personhood. The communitarian view of personhood held in Africa places personhood on communal relations and moral rectitude. Matolino avers that 'the communitarian view is quite unambiguous in asserting that the status of personhood is a derivative of communal standing' [ibid: 53]. African philosophers have explained how this is possible. Placid Tempels [1959] averred that within the African context a person exists within the context of vital force that links him to other beings that possess this vital force; and it is this vital force that gives the individual the capacity to be a person and to relate with others in significant ways. Death does not terminate this linkage rather it moves the departed to another stage in the context of forces. But this does not happen unless the relatives of the dead sustain him with certain rituals. This view is characteristically held by the Bamana people, a native African tribe in Mali, whereby *nyama* (life-force) is regarded as the central point of life; the essential characteristic of a person is his links with *nyama* without which existence is impossible [Leyten 2015]. However, Tempels maintained that merely having within his being the vital force does not confer the status of person on the individual human. Rather, he must be capable of being relational in context with other beings (humans and nonhuman); for 'the human being, apart from the ontological hierarchy and the interaction of forces has no existence' [Tempels 1959: 67]. This means that outside the communal context of relations one cannot be said to be a person at all. Matolino explains that:

> *What Tempels is driving at is that this force alone is not adequate to grant existence to the individual. The extra requirement that is needed is that the individual must be able to interact with other forces in the hierarchy of forces. Once that interaction is underway then, ontologically, the individual is thought of as a real person that exists* [Matolino 2008: 60].

John Mbiti is another philosopher who has written about what it means to be person in the African context. He averred that one derives one's personhood from membership to a tribe. Yet membership in an African tribe is not open to outsiders, the individual has to be born into it.

> *These then are the main features of an African "tribe," people, society or nation. A person has to be born a member of it, and he cannot change tribal membership. On rare occasions he can be adopted ritually into another tribal group, but this is seldomly done and applies to both Africans and non-Africans* [Mbiti 1969: 104].

Apart from birth, an individual can become a member of an African community by marriage, and by other tribal adoption based on either being an *iman* (distant cousin) or on the basis of one's relatives having lived in the community for a life time and having good social-moral records among tribal people. Meanwhile, biological birth alone is not enough to confer personhood status on the individual. The individual needs other people in the community to induct him into the corporate life of the community as a person capable of claiming such. It is the community that produces the person. No individual has the right to create himself as a person or lay claim to the identity of the community without being properly inducted.

> *In traditional life, the individual does not and cannot exist alone except corporately. He owes his existence to other people, including those of 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 depends on the corporate group. Physical birth is not enough: the child must go through rites of incorporation so that it becomes fully integrated into the entire society. These rites continue throughout the physical life of the person, during which the individual passes from one stage of corporate existence to another. The final stage is reached when he dies and even then he is ritually incorporated into the wider family of both the dead and the living* [ibid: 108].

The individual cannot be thought of outside the context of the community. The individual can only say: 'I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am' [ibid]. This means that only through other persons can a person become conscious of his own being and the attendant rights and duties attached thereto. The dictum 'I am because we are' is not that of an individual speaking on behalf of, or in reference to, others. Rather, it is that of an individual who recognizes other persons as the source of his own humanity, the absence of which 'no ground exist for a claim regarding individual's own standing as a person' [Menkiti 2004: 324].

Another philosopher who has written about the concept of person in African context is Ifeanyi Menkiti. He holds the view of a normative conception of person based on 'ontological progression'. He argues that the best way to define personhood in the African context is to view it as a progression from individual human child into communal personhood and beyond as ancestor [ibid]. But such ontological progression must be contextualized within one's past; 'so that the more of a past one has, the more standing as a person one also has' [ibid: 325]. This means that one's past serves as orbit or trajectory that guides one's progress into an African personhood. Without having this past (identified with one's ancestor) in an African community, one's progression into African person would be a null. The ontological progression into African personhood must be via the community and aided by the community through certain prescribed norms and societal rites [ibid]. The community plays this vital role in making one attain personhood because it is the community that defines a person as person; particularly because the community exists prior to the individual. In the African context, personhood is not construed as a biological given.

> *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. Hence, the African emphasized the rituals of incorporation and the overarching necessity of learning the social rules by which the community lives, so that what was initially biologically given can come to attain social self-hood, i.e., become a person with all the inbuilt excellencies implied by the term. That full personhood is not perceived as simply given at the very beginning of one's life, but is attained after one is well along in society* [Menkiti 1984: 173].

He also opines that 'without incorporation into this or that community, individuals are considered to be mere danglers to whom the description "person" does not fully apply' [ibid:

172]. One's human biological birth by an African parent is not enough to attain the status of African person; one has to earn that identity. Menkiti observes:

> *The various societies found in traditional Africa routinely accept this fact that personhood is the sort of thing which has to be attained, and is attained in direct proportion as one participates in communal life through the discharge of the various obligations defined by one's stations* [ibid: 176].

These obligations include maintaining moral rectitude; showing concern towards, and rendering assistance to the physically challenged, the poor, the destitute and the indigent of the society where one lives; accepting the existence of others on a par with one's own; and showing manifest care towards the growth, development, survival and flourishing of African community [Ekei 2014; Francis 2016b]. This is what it means to be an African or become an African.

Becoming an African person thereby gaining African identity goes beyond merely taking citizenship of an African country. Mbiti [1969: 104] rightly observes that 'tribal identity is still a powerful force even in modern African statehood'. This has not changed significantly. A person who wishes to take up the African identity must play a part in an African community. Many African philosophers have noted that an individual can only be a person within communal relations. There are a number of ways this can happen. In the previous paragraphs, we have seen the view of Menkiti that such a person must have taken residence in an African community that last his entire lifetime during which period he gains more favourable conditions to be accepted and absorbed into the community and be regarded as an African person. Another possible way is if the person's ancestor is buried in the African community, where the people can point to his grave because it is only sons of the soil that are 'allowed' to be buried in African ancestral villages (ndon). This indicates that one has a past in the community, and on that basis can lay claim to a part of it. If the descendants of African enslaved ancestors want to take this option, it will require them reburying their ancestors in the African communal soil within the context of African funeral rites. This will allow them to take on the label of *iman* (cousins) thereby becoming a part of the African extended family. One other way of gaining African personhood and identity is by being married into an African community. This applies to the man where such a community is matriarchal and to the woman where such a community is patriarchal. This calls for wisdom, on the part of the descendants, in their choosing of communities from which to gain African personhood and identity. This will allow the descendants to take up the label of *ītọ abán* (indigenes by marriage).

Mbiti has indicated other ways the descendants may become African persons and properly gain African identity. One of such ways is by circumcision and initiation into communal personhood. This process is not very different from what Menkiti calls 'rituals of incorporation'. Circumcision ritual is an important step into becoming a person in the traditional African context. Mbiti [1975: 92-4] observes that circumcision is important in the life of many African communities, and serves as a criterion for being regarded as a full person in those communities. Lack of initiation into communal being puts one at the level of 'it' (a thing) and lacking the essential characteristics of being described as a person [Menkiti 2004]. One is considered an outsider (a non-person) until one is initiated into the community.

> *The blood which is shed during the physical operation binds the person to the land and consequently to the departed members of the society. It says that the individual is alive, and that he or she now wishes to be tied to the community and people, among whom he or she has been born as a child. This circumcision blood is like a covenant, or a solemn agreement, between the individual and his people. Until the individual has gone through the operation, he is still an outsider. Once he has shed his blood, he joins the stream of his people, he becomes truly one with them* [Mbiti 1975: 93].

This process is like that of becoming a Jew, whereby Yaweh instructed that any such person, young or old, should be circumcised [Genesis 17:1-27]. Mbiti further notes that the 'initiation is a mark of solemn unity and identification... Through the scars, the initiated are henceforth identified as members of such and such a people... [and] in many parts of Africa, they are given new names following their initiation' [ibid]. The process of 'initiation by circumcision' also holds significance as 'initiation by tribal mark' (which takes similar process). These processes also hold similar significance as initiation into African masquerade cults. All these are processes of initiation into tribal personhood in the African context. This is followed by the person being given a native African tribal name. It is noteworthy that the act of naming a person is one of *kujichagulia*, that is, self-determination [Zulu 2017]. That is to say, it enables the person to have individual standing recognizable by the community as a distinct person who is capable of decision-making based on individual self-interest and needs within the moral contexts of the community. The process of tribal naming is critical to attainment of personhood hence it usually comes with a lot of ceremonies and festivities. Not having a tribal name may count against one's identity as African person. These are very important steps toward acquiring African identity; and these are paths that are a bit rapid for the descendants to gain African identity. However, in spite of this, the descendants must show signs of moral rectitude and social responsibility commensurable with being called African persons. It is not merely circumcision or tribal marks that earn one a place as a person. Initiation, being merely a gateway to communal participation, must be complemented with attitudes that are in harmony with the wellbeing of the community into which one is being accepted. This means that the initiated must no longer be preoccupied with merely physical needs nor display lack of moral perception. Rather, he must be ready to play complementary moral and social roles as defined by his station in the community of his adoption.

Conclusion: The Matrix of Land and African Personhood

The matrix of land in relation to entities on it has been articulated in African philosophy. There is an active connexion between personhood, identity and the land where one's umbilical cord is buried. It is significant that one's body is buried where the umbilical cord is buried. (Umbilical cord here is used metaphorically to refer to one's ancestral lineage). It is land that connects an individual to the ancestry [Mbiti 1975: 93]. Persons, in the tribal context, are those who have part and lot in the community by ancestral linkage. The ancestral linkage to the community is entitlement to the community land. Where one fails to lay claim to ancestral land one has failed to prove one's lot in the community; therefore, one has failed to prove one's communal personhood. He is a bastard so to say. A person is a member of a community through his ancestry. One's ancestors and their burial sites are held significant in determining where one's personhood is contextualized.

Let me now briefly draw from the Annang ontological maxim – *adia mkpo ano isong koro isong adehe ayaka 'gwo* (always show existential gratitude to the land for we share common heritage) – to show the existential-ontological connexions between man and land. Ibanga has articulated this maxim in a number of his essays. For example, in one of his essays, he held that humans are connected to the land by birth and death; and that human existence depends on the land because it is from it humans derive the nourishment necessary for survival [Ibanga 2013]. The creation account of the Egyptians and Hebrews holds that it is from land that one comes into existence and by it that one goes out of existence [Genesis 3:19]. In another essay, Ibanga [2012] equates land to the woman's reproductive system whereby he argues that the land like the womb is the cradle of life, and through it one is brought into the world. If the land like the womb closes its door to an individual, then he cannot come into personhood.

Ibanga [2018] describes land as a living thing enlivened with life-force. He also defines land as 'the source of life and existence itself' [ibid: 125]. In other words, on land we live and have our beings. Ibanga [2017] opines that human beings are the progenies of land; and they are tied to land via the life-force as the foetus is tied to the mother via the umbilical cord. It is from land that human beings came into existence in a particular place. Land is therefore the bridge that connects all beings (both beings-in-sight and beings-out-of-sight) on an interrelational mode. African philosophers have pointed out that life-force or vital force permeates all existents, links animate to inanimate beings (e.g. links land with man); and without this connexion, an individual cannot be said to exist in the African context. It is the land that links one's here-before to one's here-after. The former is signified by the manner in which one's umbilical cord is disposed and the latter by the manner in which one's corpse is disposed. The ancestors are said to inhabit the land below but only their community land they inhere. In determining personhood and identity, the land of one's birth is not as significant as the land of one's ancestor's birth. But the ancestor's birthplace is not enough in determining personhood, the place where his body is laid in rest is equally important. The connexion between birthplace and burial-place in determining personhood necessarily brings land into the relationship. It is the land that projects the individual into existence through birth, and it is the land that absorbs the individual and makes him part of community land through death.

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