

PERSONHOOD IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION: UNDERSTANDING THE NGAS PERSON

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ABSTRACT

The search for the meaning of the concept 'personhood' has generated a huge debate in various disciplines and religions for a long time across the globe. This article examined the concept of personhood in Ngas traditional religious thought and also how the Ngas person is made. Persons are at the centre most worlds' religions and in Ngas traditional religion they also occupy the centre stage. Understanding the Ngas person will give one the opportunity of understanding the Ngas religion. To carry this anthropological research, the researcher was able to use the ethnographic method of data collection. Interviews were conducted mostly with practitioners of the religion and also some elders who were part of the religion before now. Participant observation was also employed. Secondary sources of data from existing literature were also used for the compilation of this work. This research work has brought into lime light the understanding of the Ngas person, his identity and also that the status of a person amongst the Ngas is not something that one is birthed with but rather a status that one acquires as he/she grows in conformity with the laid down rules and procedures of the community. Rite of passage plays an important role in this capacity. The researcher recommends that more scholarship be carried out in this field for future of the tradition.

Keywords: *Personhood, Ngas, Traditional Religion*

INTRODUCTION

Personhood generally refers to the status of being a person. What this means is that human beings are members of a moral community, that they have moral rights and privileges as a result, and that there is an inherent value to this status (Sullivan 1). Man is believed to have a special place among the creatures in most of the world's religions. African Traditional Religion is among the world's religion in which man is held in high esteem and also seen as central to the religion. According to Richard Gehman, the whole emphasis of African traditional religion is upon man gaining the power needed to live as a result of good life. He then concluded that life revolves around man and his interests and needs (50). According to him, man forms the context in which African Traditional Religion is functioned. Man is at the centre of African Traditional Religion rather than God or any spiritual being. African traditional religion is viewed rather as system of problem solving rather than a system of worship. In this case, behind every African traditional religion's practice there is a human problem that man tries to solve by dealing with the supernatural (Grebe and Fon 40). Everything else in African-world view seems to get its bearing and significance from the position, meaning and end of man in African thought (Metuh, African Religions 95). If man then is at the centre of the religion, it means the quest to know the make-up of man will not be out of place.

John Mbiti also pointed out that African Traditional Religion is anthropocentric. According to him, man is at the centre of existence and African peoples see everything else in its relation to this central position of man. To further give more explanation on the nature of man, Mbiti opines that God is the

explanation of man's origin and sustenance: it is as if God exists for the sake of man (90). If man can be seen from this angle, it then means that there are some entities in man which need to be harnessed in order to determine that which gives him that special position.

According to Menkiti, African view of man denies that persons can be defined by focusing on this or that physical or psychological characteristics of the lone individual as being viewed by the western world on the nature of man. He then succumbed to the fact that man is defined by reference to the environment of his/her community taking his stand from the favorite dictum credited to John Mbiti on the place of man in the community "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am" (171). By this view, one can assume that the true definition of who a man is can only be done correctly by the community where the man is and not by his physical build up or anything else.

Menkiti maintains that there is a crucial distinction between the African view of man in African community and that of the western view or thought. According to him, "it is in rootedness in an ongoing human community that an individual comes to see himself as man, and it is by first knowing this community", for to him, personhood is something which has to be achieved and is not given simply because one is being born of human seed (171-172). This stand by Menkiti signifies that one has to work for the type of person he/she becomes in as much as the community is concerned. Still on the issue, Menkiti insists that as far as African societies are concerned, personhood is something, which an individual could fail, hence he maintains that Africans emphasize the rituals of incorporation and also

learning of social rules by which the community lives so that what was initially biologically given can come to attain social self-hood. As such, full personhood is not perceived simply as given at the very beginning of one's life. The older the individual gets, the more a person he becomes (173).

According to Ikenga-Metuh, man is a force in the midst of other forces in the universe (ontological view). Man is a living force, active, and interacting with other forces in the universe. He added that, socially, the African doctrine of man strikes a balance between his personal identity as a unique individual person and his collective identity as a member of his society (Comparative Religions, 169). Being described as a force amidst other forces, it then implies that there has to be the existence of mutual relationship between the forces so as to ensure harmony. Each individual is unique and has roles to play towards ensuring the growth and development of the society. One needs to have all that it takes to be fully recognized as a member of the society to which one belongs.

The Ngas community also is African and has its special way of defining who a person is based on the standards of the society. The perspective in which the Ngas traditional religion views on man differs just as man is viewed in many African religions. As noted by Imafidon, there seems to be no consensual view as to the constituents of the person in African culture because there tends to be slight difference of views from one African community to another (3). Man is an embodiment of many things so far as African culture is concerned. It is these many things that make up man, which the researcher intends to find out. The researcher intends to investigate and understand the Ngas definition of person and

see how it relates to the views of other African societies or communities on the nature and constituents of a person.

The Ngas people are mainly found in the central part of Nigeria, Plateau State in Particular. They presently occupy two Local Governments of the state which are, Pankshin and Kanke respectively. History has it that the Ngas people migrated from Egypt to Kanem Borno region of Nigeria from where they further migrated to their present settlement known as the *yil ngas* (Ngas Land) through the Bauchi axis. This explains why we still have some Ngas people who are indigenes of Bauchi State particularly in Tapshin area of Tafawa Balewa Local Government. There are claims from some angles that the Ngas people are actually relations of the Kanuri people of Borno state. The Ngas people, as earlier on stated inhabit the present day Pankshin and Kanke Local Governments of Plateau state, Nigeria, some 120 and 150 kilometers from Jos, the capital of Plateau State. Pankshin Local Government occupies the area of about 1523.6271 square kilometres, while Kanke occupies a land area of about 926.0634 square kilometers. The Ngas people are generally classified into two major groups based on the settlement pattern. We have the Hill Ngas (*ngo kha geng*) and the Plain Ngas (*ngo n'gin*). The plain Ngas settled in the areas of Amper, Ampang East, Dawaki, Gyangyang, and Kabwir about 600 to 800 meters above the sea level while the hill Ngas settled in Pankshin, Wokkos and Garram areas about 800 and 1400 meters above the sea level.

Man is seen, understood, interpreted and approached as ethnic, racial and tribal (Turaki 94). To understand the Ngas man there is a need for a proper investigation on what he

really understands by the term person and how it affects his day today activities.

AFRICAN RELIGIONS AND PERSONHOOD

As viewed by many authors, the African conception of the term personhood is not the same as that of the western or European conception. This in a way explains why the concept is a bit complex in nature. Even within the African purview, the understanding of the concept differs from one community to the other. John Klaasen opines that personhood in the African religion is not something one is born with, s/he grows into it. One has to pass through some processes to attain it. In his explanations, Klaasen states that "too integral to African personhood is the rites of passage that each individual or in some cases groups must go through" (Klaasen). By implication of the statement above, it therefore implies that without the processes such as the rites of passage, one might miss the privilege or right of achieving personhood.

In order to further establish his facts that the concept of personhood in Africa differs from that of the western world, Klaasen is of the opinion that the term be viewed from both the angles (European and African contexts). He asserts that most western views of man are abstract feature of the lone individual and then proceeds to make it the defining or characteristics that describe man. This he explained in agreement with the explanation given by Menkiti. Menkiti maintains that in African view, a person cannot be defined by focusing on this or that physical or psychological characteristics of the lone individual. He explains that man in Africa is defined by the envioning community. In conclusion Menkiti states that as far as Africans are concerned, the

reality of the communal world takes precedence over the reality of individual life histories whatever they may be (171).

To further buttress the distinction between the western and the African conception of man, Menkiti mentioned that in the African view, it is the community that defines a person as a person and not some isolated static qualities, rationality will or memory (171-172). The western thought of a man is actually hinged on some isolated qualities of this or that. Menkiti agrees to the fact that personhood in Africa is something which one has to acquire and is not given simply because one is born of the human seed, and as such individuals could fail at the process. Menkiti also agrees to the fact that individuals undergo some rites of incorporation in the communities or societies. In his assertions, the older the individual becomes, the more of a person he becomes (173). This stand is still pointing to the simple fact of the role and the place of the community in the definition of a person in an African setting as against the western conception.

According to Oyowe, the conception of personhood has received substantial treatment by African philosophers. According to him, the idea that personhood is socially acquired or that it is something that can be had in concert with others (204). This statement acknowledges the role of the community in giving identity to an individual. Describing person from the African societal point of view, Ikenga Metuh opines that in Africa, a person is defined in terms of the group he belongs. He stated that it is the community that defines who a person is or who he can become. A person is thought of first of all as a member of a particular community for it is the community which defines who he is and who he

can become (181). Thus, the family, lineage, the clan and tribe play an important role in the making of an African person. An African is not always asked 'who are you', but 'whose son are you'. Metuh then concluded that, without the family, an individual is nobody. For the family makes a man (Comparative Religions, 182). This opinion of Metuh also goes along with that of many African scholars like Menkiti. This thought also affirms the role of the community in defining a person. Metuh also agrees to the fact that individuals need to undergo some series of initiation rites to get incorporated into the society (Comparative Religions, 183).

In Joseph Kahiga and Jason Eberl's view, personhood in African communities is bounded by tribe, culture, race, gender, religion and class. Accordingly, they maintain that the basic view of personhood in Africa is communalistic (1). Their view also is geared towards acknowledging the role of the community in the defining of a person. Understanding their stand, one can also presume that even within the same community, there are still variables that are to be looked into when it comes to the definition of a person. In their own way, Kahiga and Eberl made some comparison between the western and the African perspective of personhood. In their comparison, they noted that the western view of a person is transcendental, persons having infinite moral values. This view looks at persons as self-conscious, rational and autonomous (2). This assertion implies the self sufficiency of man void of any definition by any individual or community. The African view of a person to them is communalistic which is confined to the community which the individual finds himself. In their submission also, personhood in Africa may be diminished or lost. This can happen as a result of lack of interrelation. This

is as against the western view which holds that personhood cannot be diminished by lack of interrelation with other beings but suggested that complete loss of reasoning may result in the loss of personhood (4). One key thing as observed in the submission of Kahiga and Eberl is that of the loss of personhood which is seen as one of the distinctive feature of the African conception of personhood which the western conception may not agree with.

Elvis Imafidon, in his attempt to describe the concept of a person, employed the approaches of man in Akan traditional thought as documented by Kwesi Wiredu. The approaches includes *descriptive* and *normative*. According to him, the descriptive concept of a person in African traditional thought has to do with the analysis of his/her constituents physical and non-physical of the human person as held in African culture and their functions or significance in the scheme of things. He then attributed the lack of general consensual views to the constituents of man in African communities to the slight differences of views from one to another (4). This idea is also a supportive idea to the communalistic nature of African conception of a person. Imafidon concludes that the descriptive concept of man reveals the ontological status of the individual person (7).

The normative approach in the African conception of a person according to Imafidon reveals the social status of the individual. Imafidon keyed into the idea or view that personhood is not actually that one is born with. In his opinion also, personhood has to be acquired and to add to that he stated that the acquisition has to be through internalization of commitment to the societal values (7). One's commitment

to the way of life in the community and abiding by the principles and the way things are done can propel one towards achieving personhood.

To summarize his stand on the approaches, Imafidon concludes therefore that the African concept of person is neither simply descriptive nor normative but rather the combination of both. Accordingly, he opined that a person is always in a process of being a person, hence not a fully complete person at any time (17). The climax of his thought can then be simply put, 'personhood is a process, hence there can be no time which an individual be considered a full or complete individual'. It then also means that it starts at birth and ends in death.

Citing the work of Ifeanyi Menkiti on personhood, Ketrin Flikschuh observed that personhood in Africa is achieved through moral membership in communal life. According to her, as individuals pass from infancy to early childhood, and adolescence, they gradually acquire social responsibilities and corresponding responsibilities (4). This submission implies that each of the stages one passes through in an African society is actually a step towards achieving personhood. Menkiti, according to Flikschuh, distinguishes between being a human being and being a person. She stated that Menkiti acknowledges that the two concepts (human being and person) are closely related. To him for one to become a person, one must be a human being. In his explanation, an infant is a human being with biological needs and want which the community is called upon to satisfy for it. However, an infant does not yet play an active moral role in the life of the community (5). In Menkiti's perception, infants are not yet persons in African

thought. Flikschuh concluded that based on the description given by Menkiti, it is reasonable to suppose the corresponding conception of the community to be one that a moral interest in making persons out of infants (6). This conclusion by Flikschuh points to the role of the community in making a person out of a being.

Further distinction between a human person and human beings was attempted by Ademola Fayemi. In his submission, all human persons are human beings but not all human beings are human persons. This he explained based on the Yoruba concept of *omoluwabi* (good person). This view is held in high esteem in most of the African societies. Fayemi noted that character (*iwa*) plays an important role in the making and passing of rights and in the integrity of individuals. He mentioned that a human being without a good character, though human, is no less than an animal (170). Relating a characterless human with an animal shows the extent at which African traditions place priority on character as a major factor for determining the status of a being, either as a person or not. Fayemi concludes that the absence of proper culture, moral probity and integrity devolves the personhood of an individual to the level of just ordinary things (171). This also revolves around the role of the community and the active role of the individual aspiring for personhood.

In his work 'Yoruba Aesthetics concept of *IWA*, Rowland Abiodun describes *Omoluwabi* as "someone who has been well brought up or as a person who is highly cultured" (cited by Omole np.). *Omoluwabi* (good person) is viewed to be someone who has a good up bringing as against he who is not cultured, who the Yoruba also refer to as *omolasan*. This purview meant

that someone has to exhibit qualities of good upbringing for his to be qualified of the status 'person'. According to Omole, *Iwa* which stands for character plays an important role in the making and passing of rights, and in the integrity of individuals because a human being without a character, though human, but is no less than an animal. She maintains that proper culture, moral probity, and integrity devalue the personhood of a person to the level of just ordinary things (psychdiscourse.com).

Abimbola reiterates that, "*omoluwabi* is a function of exhibiting and demonstrating the inherent virtues and value of *iwapele* (389)". The *iwapele* (gentle character) according to Abimbola is very important in defining an *omoluwabi*. He further went ahead to mention some of the moral principles of conduct demonstrated by *omoluwabi* to include; *orosiso* (spoken word), *iteriba* (respect), *inurere* (having good mind to other), *otito* (truth), *iwa* (character), *akinkanju* (bravery), *ise* (hard work), and *opolopipe* (intelligence). Any individual that does not exhibit these virtues might as well not be seen as a good person or not worthy of being in company of persons. For one to be a person, one has to be related in one way or the other with people. This is the position of George Omake Ehusani. According to him "relatedness characterizes the African experience of the living person". Citing Jomo Kenyatta, Ehusani maintains that in African thought, the uniqueness of an individual is a secondary fact about him or her. In his opinion, the person must be several peoples relative and several people's contemporary. This he explained making reference to why people in Africa are called by their relational name rather than their proper names (92). He emphasized the place of relationship in the make-up of the

human person. The absence of relationship according to Ehusani renders humans as non persons. In his words "for the individual affirms himself from others not by isolating himself from others but by constantly relating and exchanging with them (93).

Mbiti argues that kinship system is like a vast network of relations that spreads itself across large horizons to touch everybody. According to him, this body includes the living, the dead and those who are yet to be born. The tribal membership and kinship gives an individual his/her identity. The person owes his existence to other people, including those of past generations and his contemporaries. He is simply part of the whole. He concludes that the community must make, create or produce the individual: for the individual depends on the corporate group (141).

Mbiti maintains that physical birth is not sufficient for one to count as a person. The individual is required to observe social rituals throughout the individual's life. These rituals are performed on the individuals by the community as s/he goes through each stage of life. The community gives the individual the status of person through these rituals of incorporation at every stage of life. This status of a person is based on the standing relationship that the individual has in the community. This stand of Mbiti is clearly explained in his famous maxim "I am because we are: and since we are, therefore I am" (141). Going by this assumption one can easily conclude without the community, a person can never be made in an individual. The communitarian conception of person is the dominant view of personhood in African philosophy. This view centrally holds that personhood is something that is attained in direct

proportion to one's moral worth or one's relations with his/her surrounding community. This view understands personhood as something acquired as one's moral responsibilities grow (Matolino 1).

Personhood in Ngas Traditional Worldview

The Ngas people like any other African community have their particular understanding of the human person. The understanding might not be completely different from those other African communities but some little peculiarities shall be discussed in this article. This section discusses the making of the Ngas man putting into consideration what the concept of person in Ngas traditional thought is, who defines the Ngas person, the make-up of the Ngas person, and some identifiable features of the Ngas person.

The Ngas Concept of Person "GURUM"

The Ngas concept of a person is known as '*gurum*'. The Ngas people see a person as any human who has come of age as opposed to children. So a child or children are not yet considered persons. Some among the Ngas view persons as any human as opposed to animals or inanimate objects. A person is expected to have the ability to possess, protect (defend), and multiply. The ability to possess or acquire shows one's ability of independency. The person should have the ability to protect or defend himself, the family and also the community. In the area of multiplication, it is not just in giving birth to children, but also in all aspects of one's occupation. In the Ngas religious thought, some traits that point straight to what is expected to be of a person are maturity, a shelter, an occupation, and the ability to defend oneself and the family. An individual possessing these traits is worthy of the title

'person'. Character traits, the behavior and the deeds of an individual make a person in the Ngas traditional thought. A person is expected to be of good moral standing, behave well and also involve in the activities that promote humanity in the community. Thus, when an individual is seen portraying such qualities s/he is worthy of the title 'person' (*gurum*). To this end, Ngas person is not an abstract entity for the qualities are glaring in the life of those who bear title.

Personhood in African traditional thought is not something that is acquired at birth. This implies that humans undergo some processes in the community which mostly have to be as one grows up to become a person. In the Ngas traditional thought, infants are not considered as persons. For a child at infancy does not know his/her left from the right. At infancy a child is considered more of a toy being remote controlled by the elderly ones in the community, for it is widely believed by the Ngas people that s/he does have decision of his/hers. A child can easily put his hand in fire; can even make an attempt of playing with snake. The sense of reasonability is not in the child and so a child cannot be accorded the title person. As a child grows up s/he is being taught and also learned from the elderly ones thereby being on the path to becoming a person. The community has also some procedures or guidelines that guide an individual towards becoming a person. There are some special categories of people who acquire personhood at birth. These categories of people are usually born with special abilities to see beyond what the ordinary eyes can see. These special humans are referred to as *Jepritmwa* (the beautiful ones) and the *go-poturmwa* (those who possess chest).

WHO DEFINES A PERSON IN THE NGAS TRADITIONAL THOUGHT?

As established in the previous chapter, most African communities are saddled with the responsibility of defining who a person is. Being an African community, the Ngas people also have a way of defining who a person is. The community takes precedence in defining who a person is but in some cases, the person himself is given the opportunity to showcase his capability in case the community is in doubt of his capability. The individual in question will exhibit some traits or qualities to show that s/he has arrived.

In the Ngas communities, responsibilities and roles are ascribed to individuals as they grow or mature. The Ngas people believe that at a particular stage in one's life, the individual should be able to perform or meet up with the responsibilities equal to the stage of his/her development. The Ngas people also believe that one is always a product of what the community or society gives out to him/her. In an interview with Nde Chamching, he stated that, one is a reflection of the community he grows into. To him an Ngas boy born and bred in Yoruba community grows to be a Yoruba boy in character. The implication therefore is that the community shapes the character of the individual. It is true that an individual who feels that the community is not recognizing him as a person has the responsibility of showcasing his ability. This does not in any way take away the place of the community in giving him an identity of a person. The community still plays a big role in defining the person since personhood in African traditional thought is not an abstract thing. It is what the people see in a person that they regard him/her as (Yilsu).

The Make-Up of the Ngas Person

In discussing personhood in the Ngas general traditional thought, reference is always made of humans with responsibilities and who perform these responsibilities while living up to the expectation of the community. Humans in the Ngas community are classified into gender and status and as such each with his/her own roles and responsibilities which each gender is expected to meet up with. The ability of one to be able to carry out his/her responsibilities well makes him/her a person. In many African societies (the Ngas inclusive), the roles are clearly spelt out. This is why some roles are being ascribed to the females while some are to the males. Some roles are also ascribed to elders while some are for the children. These assigned roles shall be discussed as they relate to the gender or the status of the individuals in the community. These roles play a very significant function in the making of the African person.

The Ngas people have specified gender roles for both men and women. Each of the gender has its own specific role of which each is expected to play for the smooth running of the activities in the community starting from the family line. The roles and responsibilities are very specific and these roles count in the process of the making of a person. An individual that carries out his/her duties well can be referred to as *gurum nyet* (person). For one to be able to perform his role as expected, the individual has to undergo some forms of trainings which will help them to acquire the knowledge of what is expected of them at every stage of life. These trainings involve some rituals and some of the rituals form part of the rites of passage as will be discussed in my next work. This portion shall examine the Ngas men, and women

putting into consideration their expected roles in building the community.

THE Ngas Men

Men in Ngas culture as in any African community are the heads of their families and because of this they are regarded as special breed. The male child as documented by Wambutda is trained to realize that he is a special breed of human being, who is expected to absorb lots of pain without tears, to endure hardship, and to retaliate when attacked. Usually, he grows to be a shepherd boy where he learns to stand his ground against challenges from other boys. He also learns to wrestle and to swim. He farms in the mornings before going off to the bush with the flocks. When he is about fifteen or slightly younger, the initiation rite is performed. This is the circumcision which the boy passes through into adulthood and is recognized as a man. This offers him the privileges of participating in the worship of *kum* and ancestor worship and to the disadvantage of risking his life in war. This initiation rite is called *vwang*, understood in the context of circumcision. Anyone who has passed through the rite is seen as having been cleansed and washed... (74). After the ritual of the *vwang*, every Ngas son is being initiated into different family ritual worship and this time around, it is the family that takes the responsibility of this task. The *vwang* introduces the male child into manhood because prior to the time he is circumcised, he is considered a woman.

The Ngas man if married, is considered the head of the family. A man being the head of the family must engage himself in an occupation to take care of his family. The welfare of the family is solely on his shoulder. The man is also responsible for the physical, social, economical, psychological

and spiritual security of his household; he is the chief priest of his household. The man is almost like everything to his family. This explains the reason why if he dies the woman would often cry '*nkingrip fana ki te*' (my shield has fallen). A man who is a weakling has no place of honour in Ngas traditional set up; he is not considered a person at all.

If not married, the Ngas male is considered one of the pillars of the home/community. The young men are responsible for guarding the community and keeping it in good shape. They are considered the strength and the future of the society and the society depends on them for its survival of both the culture and the tradition. In terms of physical labour the young men are well depended upon and they are considered as the foot soldiers of the community, for without them the community is considered weak. Despite the dependence on the young men in the Ngas community, it is expected that they get married in good time. For marriage is one of the key things a man has to do in order for him to be considered a complete man. In as much as one is grown up and is not married, he is just considered as yet a child. An unmarried grown up Ngas male is denied of many opportunities, rights and privileges. A younger man who is married is considered man enough than the elderly who refused to get married. The Ngas man sees marriage as a sign of one's readiness to take up responsibility.

A male child born in a royal family is born with responsibilities. He is considered a future leader who also is expected to get married in good time to enable him produce heir or heirs for the continuity of the royal family and also for the responsibility that lies ahead of him. Any Ngas man who falls short of performing his responsibilities in the

community is not considered a person but mostly considered a woman (the term woman is usually used for weaklings in the Ngas traditional thought as women are physically weak). The word *gomis* is another term used for a great and real Ngas man. These categories of men are such that possess extra abilities and sometimes perform wonders in the community. They actually are said to be the fortified ones. Most of them undergo spiritual bathing *sup* which enables them possess the *tuput* (die and come back). This spiritual bathing also allows the men to have the second eye which allows them to see beyond what the physical eyes can see. Some men also are born with these special abilities and these special breed of men are referred to as the *jeprit* (the good sons). These groups of special sons are seen as the custodians of the land. They see anything that comes into the land whether good or evil. Among the things they possess are the second eye, feeling the presence of danger or evil, the ability to protect their loved ones, and also the ability to detect special children, including the unborn in their mother's womb. If their deaths are caused by accident, they have the ability to come back to life (the fortified Ngas men also possess this ability).

Among the qualities of the *gomis* are: they talk less and are very selective with their words, they take their time to think before reacting to situations, they live a very simple and normal life and above all they don't like being away from home or the community.

THE Ngas Women

The Ngas land like most of the African societies might not be an ideal world for the woman. The voices of the women are very often not heard in the Ngas community. The Ngas women

have their own specific responsibilities which they play for the growth of the home and community. Carrying out such responsibilities as the community specifies makes the person out of the woman in the Ngas community. Chief among the responsibility of the woman in the home is her submission to her husband. She is expected to be preoccupied with the welfare of her husband and that of her children, so, she is viewed as a home maker. She also performs domestic chores like preparing food for the family and general home keeping.

As documented by Daniel Wambutda, the female child from the young age is taught to be in the company of her mother most of the time to learn good cooking and other trades necessary for the keeping of good home (69). Wambutda summarized the duties of female Ngas whether married or unmarried as that of home keeping. According to him the females are not expected to do the hard work the men do. She wakes up early in the morning daily to grind threshold corn flour and afterward on her way to fetch water with *tu/* (a round clay pot with a neck and a round mouth bigger than the neck). Men and the other members of the family wake up to find her sweeping the entire compound. She would go into the bush to fetch firewood from time to time. She usually does not engage herself in any hard work, for hard works are reserved for men.

The Identity of the Ngas

Every community has some distinctive ways of identifying itself from other people and communities. Ethnic groups tend to share some similarities such as language, ancestry, culture and society. There are some identification marks which actually define the people of the same ethnicity which the

members share in common. Examples of such include cultural heritage, origin, myth, ancestry, homeland, and dialect. Some of the marks of the identity of the ethnic groups can be symbolic in nature. Some good examples include; religion, rituals, dressing styles, cuisine, art, and even the physical appearance of the people. The Ngas people have some identifiable traits which they use in identifying themselves from among other people and also some physical features and characters which their neighbours identify them with. Some of these features and traits will form the discussion below.

The Ngas Tribal Marks

Tribal marks (sometimes referred to as facial marks) are a specific mark which comes in different shapes and sizes, commonly found on the face. These marks served as marks of identification, indicating one's ethnic group, background and sometimes the ethnic groups historical migration patterns (Oti and Ayeni 26; George, Ogunbiyi and Daramola 23). There are various tribal marks by different ethnic groups across the globe, most especially in Africa. Within a tribal or ethnic group one might discover that there are also different types of tribal or facial marks which most often are associated with clans or ethnic enclave. The Yoruba people of Nigeria for example, have different types of tribal marks among the different Yoruba ethnic groups. Some of these marks are *Abaja, Keke or Gombo, Ture, Pele, Mande and Jamgbadi* (Oti and Ayeni 26).

Historically, tribal markings have been a long standing practice that has played a significant role in cultural consciousness and community building in African societies. Tribal markings has its origin as a practice among Australian

Aborigines dating back to 60,000 B.C., and afterward dispersed and adopted by many communities worldwide. In Africa, tribal marks are generally used for all the genders for several reasons. Some of these reasons are: for festivals, feast celebrations, daily attire, beauty and strength, and each of the markings vary from region to region. Body markings among some tribes are to show stages of development or rites of passage (Endurance, Michael and Daniel 37). The identity of the Ngas people might not be unconnected with the name of tribe itself '*ngas*'. The literal meaning of the word *Ngas* is 'cheek'. Daniel Nimcir Wambutda suggests that perhaps the Ngas tribal marks which is a stroke each side of the cheeks which are made from a point just above the ear and running down the very middle of the cheeks until both strokes almost joint up at the jaw, that the name for the whole tribe *Ngasmwa* originated (27-28). This distinguishing mark according to the report of Resident of Bauchi Province of 1928 as cited in the work of Rotgak Gofwen is also referred to as *linzami*. The mark as explained above is a scar from bottom of each ear to the chin.

The marks or the cutting of the cheek is referred to as *bak chal*. 'Bak' literally means to 'cut or rip open', and the 'chal' the 'cheek', joined together *bak chal* means to 'rip open or cut the cheek'. This mark is a distinguishing feature of the Ngas person. The Ngas people were known to be people who always kept to their words and this sense of value earned them the merit of the idiom *one mark one word* (*aska daya, magana daya*) by the Hausa people (Abraham 39). The Ngas people believed in such value and tried all they could to live by that standard. Information gathered at the field revealed that at a point if the Ngas man sets out to carry out a task he does

not back out easily no matter the difficulties. The Ngas person always held onto this saying '*bi che khi ching gyem Ngas ka*' which simply means 'nothing is difficult for the Ngas son'.

With the arrival of the Christian missionaries on the Ngas soil, the tradition of the *bak chal* (tribal marks) was gradually fading. This is as a result of the fact that the missionaries frowned at the process of the cutting of the body because of the pains inflicted on the candidate while the cheeks are being cut. Some of the Ngas communities who accepted wholly the new faith of the missionaries decided to stop the marks but then to some communities all they could do is to look for softer way of marking the cheeks by applying some liquid fluids *mwey* or *meh* extracted from a plant known as *kampor* on the marks so as to reduce the pains. Most of the communities that hold on to the marks at that time were within the hill Ngas.

The tradition of the tribal marks which was gradually dying got itself awakened as a result of the breakout of the Nigerian civil war from 1967 to 1970. The only reason was that, some of the Ngas men who joined the Nigerian army and were participating in the civil war came back home and insisted that their kinsmen or people be given the marks for identity, because according to them, it is the only way to survive the enemies. With that assertion, many people gave in for those tribal marks not minding the pains associated with the process. After the Nigerian civil war of 1967-1970, the culture of the tribal mark started fading again. Most of the people with the marks now are those that were given birth to long before the civil war and maybe within the period of the

war. With the fading of the *bak chal*, the Ngas people resorted to some marks and this time around not for identity but for adornment. These marks are also two but not on the cheeks but directly on the face, one each beside the nostril or slightly under the eyes. These marks are referred to as *mbi yit me* or *mbi gyer*. This has been the practice by different families till now, but is a matter of choice. Ngas people are not the only ethnic group practice the new marking.

The 'Nkarang'

The term *nkarang* is the traditional way the Ngas people refer to themselves when talking to each other. The Ngas man believes in the existence of two categories of people in the universe. The first is the *nkarang* (the Ngas man) and *nlap* (an outsider). This term is exclusively used by the Ngas people amongst themselves and not even in the presence of an outsider. The meaning of the word *nkarang* according to Daniel Wambutda is racial in nature. The Ngas man sees himself as the only *true self*, all other people as *nlap* (uncultured or not well behaved people). With reference to the term *nlap*, no race outside the Ngas' is excluded as even the Christian missionaries to the Ngas land were referred to as *nlap*. Just as it was established before now that personhood is something to be acquired, Daniel Wambutda reiterated that the value of *nkarang* is something that is acquired as any good sense of value. To this end, an Ngas individual can be referred to as *nlap* if he fails to live up to expectation (28).b

Among the qualities that are expected of any Ngas individual are; recognizing other persons as humans, performing one's social obligations to one's blood relations in terms of needs,

taking care of the needy and relating well with other people (Wambutda 85). An individual with the opposite of these qualities can be referred to as *nlap*. Any abnormal pattern of life in an Ngas man makes him/her *nlap*. The behaviour of the *nlap* is likened to that of animals as asserted by the Ngas people. For the Ngas when you are being referred to as 'nkarang', it simply shows your completeness as a person in terms of character, the way you relate with other people and above all, a true Ngas blood.

Bravery

The Ngas people possess a high spirit of determination in whatever they do and are never said to easily quit tasks assigned to them, for they believe that the Ngas person can achieve any task saddled upon him. The Ngas person always believes in his abilities, what he knows he can do, he can do. History has it that the Ngas people always aspire for freedom wherever they settled and that probably might be some of the reasons behind most of their migrations. In Wambutda's submission, "their settlement are filled with stories of migration due to quarrels over succession to the throne or the other" (82).

According to H.D. Foulkes' report, the name Angas (This is what obtained in some authors report of the people) was bestowed on them by the Filons, and was given to the people according to their own account because they were so truculent as slaves, not only in always endeavouring to escape but also if struck by their owners, in giving back blow for blow (cited in Gofwen 29). This is an act of bravery. A lazy person, coward or a weakling is not regarded as a person in Ngas community (Kupkah).

CONCLUSION

In Africa, persons are not born but are made and because of this, the need for an individual to aspire for the status. Views on the constituents of a person may defer from one African community to the other but the fact still remains that there are processes that one has to follow for him/her to attain the said status of a person. Some processes are elaborate in some communities while some are not. The elaborateness or not of any process is highly dependent on the value attached to that process by the community in which the process is observed.

From the research, it was discovered that man represents a focal point in every religion of the world. His relationship with the Supreme Being and also of the other beings is also central. Many scholars view of the centrality of man in African religious thought calls for the understanding of the nature of man and all that he constitutes. The constituents of man are what make him/her a person. Personhood, seen as the term which simply refers to the status of being a person is viewed differently by different scholars from different disciplines globally. The African stand on the concept of personhood is that it is only acquired not birthed with.

The Ngas understanding of the concept of personhood is not also different from that of most African communities. Personhood is an acquired status which the community has the role of dishing out to any deserving son or daughter of the community. Preparations for one to acquire the status most often start from birth. As an individual grows into the community, s/he undergoes trainings that are commiserate with the stage which s/he belongs to or about to belong so as to enable him/her get acquaintance with what is expected of him in that stage of life. The community has its expectation

from the individual at every stage of life. The ability for one to live up to the expectations makes the person out of the individual.

The rituals and the ceremonies that one undergoes from one stage of life to the other are the rites of passage. The rites of passage are very important because they give the individual the required trainings and accompaniments for the new phase of life s/he is about to start. In Africa, every individual is a novice to the stage of life he has not attained. The Ngas people have carefully designed such trainings from one's birth to the day he takes his or her last breathe to enable him/her acquire the status. Any individual that falls short of expectation at any level is not considered a person.

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