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On Personhood: an Anthropological Perspective from Africa

JOHN L. AND JEAN COMAROFF
University of Chicago
American Bar Foundation

Prolegomenon

Is the idea of 'the autonomous person' a European invention?

This conundrum, posed to us by colleagues in philosophy and anthropology at the University of Heidelberg in June 1997, seems straightforward enough. Even ingenuous. But hiding beneath its surface is another, altogether less innocent question, one which carries within it a silent claim: to the extent that 'the autonomous person' *is* a European invention, does its absence elsewhere imply a deficit, a failure, a measure of incivility on the part of non-Europeans? And what of the corollary: is this figure, this 'person', the end point in a world-historical telos, something to which non-occidentals are inexorably drawn as they cast off their primordial differences? Is it, in other words, a universal feature of modernity-in-the-making, a Construct in the Upper Case? Or is it merely a lower case, local euroconstruct?[1]

We begin our excursion into African conceptions of personhood in a decentring, relativising voice, the voice often assumed by anthropologists to discomfort cross-disciplinary, transcultural, suprahistorical discourses about Western categories, their provenance and putative universality. From our disciplinary perspective, 'the *autonomous* person', that familiar trope of European bourgeois modernity (Taylor, 1989), *is* a Eurocentric idea. And a profoundly parochial, particularistic one at that.[2] To be sure, the very notion that this generic person might constitute a universal is itself integral to its Eurocultural construction, a part of its ideological apparatus. What is more, '*the* autonomous person' — the definite, singular article — describes an *imaginaire*, an ensemble of signs and values, a hegemonic formation: neither in Europe, nor any place else to which it has been exported, does it exist as an unmediated sociological reality (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1991, 60f). Neither, of course, does the classical contrast between (I) the self-made, self-conscious, right-bearing individual of 'modern Western society', that hyphenated Cartesian figure epitomised in the Promethean hero of Universal History (Carlyle, 1842, p. 1), and (ii) the relational, ascriptive, communalistic, inert self attributed to premodern others. As we shall see, African notions of personhood are infinitely more complicated than this tired theoretical antinomy allows (Fortes, 1973; La Fontaine, 1985; Lienhardt, 1985).[3] So, too, is the telos of Afromodernity, which

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is not moving, in a fixed evolutionary orbit, toward Euromodernity. For one thing, the continent, as diverse as it is large, has spawned alternative modernities in which very different notions of selfhood, civility, and publicity have taken root (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1999a). For another, there is a strong counter-teleological case to be made: a case for the radically revisionist thesis that, in sociolegal terms at least, Europe is evolving toward Africa, not the other way around. But that is a story for another time.[4]

As this suggests, we shall call into doubt the universality of 'the autonomous person' by recourse to an anthropological insistence on cultural and historical specificity (see La Fontaine, 1985). But this does not exhaust either our objectives here or the interrogative that frames them: … *a European Invention*? Phrased thus, the question mark points toward two further problems: is the idea of 'the autonomous person' properly regarded as an invention at all? If so, is it to be attributed to Europe? The first, patently, depends on the manner in which we understand processes of cultural production; the second, on the extent to which we allow that anything in European modernity was ever fabricated endogenously — rather than in hybridising encounters with significant, usually colonised, others. We shall return, in due course, to the historical dialectics underlying the rise of post-enlightenment Western constructions of selfhood and, with them, to the answers to these questions.

First, however, let us turn to Africa. Note that we do not seek to arrive at a generic account of '*the* African conception of personhood'. There is no such thing. Our purpose is to take one good, historically-situated case: that of the Southern Tswana peoples of South Africa during the late colonial period. As it happens, much of what we shall have to say about Tswana imaginings of being-in-the-world, and about their historical anthropology, has broad resonances elsewhere across the continent. But, more to the present point, by illuminating the contrasts and consonances between African and European discourses of personhood, this case casts a sharp, prismatic light on received Western notions of the modernist self and its antinomies.

Personhood and Society in the Interiors of South Africa

Among those peoples who, during the colonial encounter, came to be known as '*the* Tswana',[5] personhood was everywhere seen to be an intrinsically social construction. This in two senses: first, nobody existed or could be known except in relation and with reference to, even as part of, a wide array of significant others;[6] and, second, the identity of each and every one was forged, cumulatively, by an infinite, ongoing series of practical activities. *Pace* Tönnies, selfhood was not ascribed: status and role were determined by factors other than birth or genealogy, although social standing was typically represented in genealogical terms (Comaroff and Roberts, 1981, pp. 37–46).[7] For reasons having to do with its internal workings — anthropologists have long noted that the coexistence of an ideology of patrilineal descent with endogamous marriage yields social orders of this sort[8] — the Tswana world of the time was at once highly communal and highly individuated. From within, it was perceived as a rule-governed, hierarchical, and ordered universe, and yet as an enigmatical,

shifting, contentious one: a universe in which people, especially men, had to 'build themselves up' — to constitute their person, position, and rank — by acquiring 'wealth in people', orchestrating ties of alliance and opposition, and 'eating' their rivals. Potentially at least, selfhood and social status, which was reckoned in terms of agnatic seniority, was always negotiable, an observation which Gluckman (1963) once claimed to be true of all African 'tribal' societies. For Tswana of the colonial era, in sum, 'the person' was a constant work-in-progress; indeed, a highly complex fabrication, whose complexity was further shaded by gender, generation, class, race, ethnicity, and religious ideology. Among other things.

But we are running ahead of ourselves. A bit more background first. The Tswana peoples today compose one of the largest ethnic groupings in South Africa.[9] At least from the late eighteenth century onward, and probably for a good time before (Legassick, 1969, p. 98), the majority of them lived in expansive chiefdoms in the central, semi-arid interior of the country; although, for more than a hundred and thirty years, many have either migrated to cities and towns across the subcontinent or have lived in small decentralised rural communities (Schapera, 1953; Comaroff and Comaroff, 1991, p. 127). Until the colonial state went about subverting their autonomy, the chiefdoms were a substantial political presence on the landscape, their economies founded on cultivation, cattle, hunting, and trade (Shillington, 1985). Each was centred on a densely-populated capital, with thousands of residents ordered into family groups and wards, surrounded by fields and cattle-posts; polities (*merafe*) stretched as far as chiefs and their subjects could pasture and protect their animals (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1990). In the spaces between were tracts of 'bush', cross-cut by pathways that linked the capitals. These trails served as vectors of trade and alliance, of warfare and raiding, and of the exchange of cultural knowledge over long-distances (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1997, p. 54).

With the arrival of Protestant evangelists and European settlers from the 1820s onwards, the region became increasingly populated. And contested. White farms, trading posts, and villages began to dot the countryside. Along with the missions — themselves augmented by schools, shops, and other structures — they soon asserted a visible presence on the 'bushveld'. Inexorably, roads and transport routes followed; inexorably, autochthonous populations found more and more of their land expropriated. With the mineral revolution, Southern Tswana, already schooled by the civilising mission in bourgeois ideas of property and progress, would learn the lessons of colonial capitalism at first hand. Many migrated as neophyte proletarians to the burgeoning mining settlements just beyond the edges of their territory; some benefited greatly from the opening up of markets for their produce and their services; all became embroiled in a rapid process of class formation, in which new patterns of social distinction and ideological difference, partly phrased in the polite language of the Protestant ethic, came to divide old communities. Finally, in the 1880s, overrule inserted the British state onto this terrain. Its structures and personnel located themselves either in the white towns at the hub of farming districts or in newly erected administrative centres, from which nearby 'natives' could be governed. Often these centres were sited close to

Tswana capitals and brought in yet more Europeans, generally in pursuit of trade and business; the building of a railway line across the territory in the 1890s made it accessible to people and goods otherwise unlikely ever to have entered it. Which, in turn, exacerbated the ingress of Southern Tswana into the racialised, class-fragmented world of colonial economy and society — with all that it entailed (see e.g. Shillington, 1985; Molema, 1966).

The most obvious thing it entailed was a complicated, contradictory sociology. On one hand, colonialism spawned relations that transected the lines of race, class, and culture, creating hybrid identities and unexpected patterns of consociation (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1997, pp. 24–25).[10] On the other, it came to be represented as a sharply sundered, Manichean world, in which the cleavage between black and white, ruler and ruled, African and European was cast in stone. Elsewhere (1997, pp. 24–29), we have argued that this schismatic reality was endemic to the construction of colonial societies. We have also shown that, in its representation here — wrought largely as a result of the encounter between Southern Tswana and colonial evangelists — this irredeemable opposition came to be phrased as a contrast between *sekgoa*, European ways and means, and *setswana*, their Tswana counterpart; each being reduced from a dynamic, evanescent, open-ended, historically expansive order of signs and practices to an ahistorical essence, a fetishised object, a tradition. A culture.

In point of historical fact, the content subsumed by these two constructs, by *setswana* and *sekgoa*, changed a great deal over time; that much is clear from the documentary record. However, they continued to stand in stark antinomy throughout the colonial epoch. To be sure, their residues persist today — even as they are encompassed within an increasingly heterotopic postcolonial cultural politics. It is out of this contrast that we may begin to draw our description of what personhood, as framed in *setswana*, may be taken to have meant during the late colonial period; to have meant, that is, both as a stereotypic representation and as a set of intersubjective practices.

Of Being and Becoming

As we said a moment ago, the Southern Tswana world was a socially fluid, evanescent field of social relations: one in which, despite the stress on genealogical placement, the onus was on citizens, especially adult males, to 'build themselves up', to protect themselves from their enemies and rivals, to negotiate their rank and status,[11] and to extend themselves across social space by accumulating wealth in people. Of course, not everybody was equal in this respect. For one thing, there were, until well into the colonial period, various forms of servitude to be found in most chiefdoms (Schapera, 1938; see Tagart, 1933). Slaves and servants, who were regarded as semi-social beings (Moffat, 1842, p. 383; Mackenzie, 1883, p. 57), lacked the right to own property or possessions — indeed, to be self-possessed. For another thing, women were jural minors, subject to the representation of their senior male kin. In the context of everyday social life, as well as in political processes that played themselves out away from the public eye, females were anything but inert or

impotent; quite the opposite (J.L.Comaroff, 1987b). But, legally speaking, they lived in the passive voice: for example, where a man might marry (*go nyala*), a woman *was* married (*go nyalwa*). For a third thing, status made a difference. Kings and commoners, the rich and the poor, ritual experts and supplicants enjoyed varying capacities to act upon the world; not least, as we shall see, because the empowering activities of some people had the effect of reducing the potency and potentiality of others.

This qualification aside, however, most Southern Tswana adults found themselves engaged constantly in a praxis of self-construction. Given the scaffolding of their universe, it could not be otherwise. Either people acted upon the world or the world acted upon them. Or both, in some proportion. Every now and again this involved dramatic confrontations over property, possessions, or position. For the most part, however, it entailed the unceasing, quotidian business of cultivating relations and fields, of husbanding animals and allies, of raising offspring and avoiding the malign intentions of others, of gradually accumulating cultural capital and cash to invest in the future. Here, then, is the first principle of contemporary Tswana personhood: it referred not to a state of being but to a state of becoming. No living self could be static. Stasis meant social death.

The principle of personhood as a mode of becoming expressed itself in every aspect of social existence. Take, for instance, marriage, an ensemble of practices often treated as the site, *par excellence*, of social formation and reproduction.[12] Earlier generations of anthropologists were wont to say that, in Africa, wedlock was a process rather than 'an event or condition' (Radcliffe-Brown, 1951, p. 49); that, as Murray (1976, 1981) has observed of Lesotho, the salient question was not whether or not two people were married, but how much. Among Southern Tswana, the creation of a conjugal bond, and of the parties to it as fully social adults, took the form of a protracted, cumulative succession of exchanges, sometimes ending only after the death of the spouses. What is more, the status of that bond was always open to (re)interpretation — as casual sex, concubinage (*bonyatsi)*, living together (*ba dula mmogo*), marriage (*nyalo*) — this being facilitated by the fact that the terms used between partners (*monna* [m], *mosadi* [f]) were unmarked; they might as well have referred to someone with whom an individual cohabited the night before as to a mate of long-standing. Nor, in the flow of everyday life, was any effort made to clarify such things: relations might go undefined because, in the normal course of events, they were growing, developing, becoming. As were the human beings involved in them. It was only at moments of rupture, when the continuing present came to an abrupt end, that there was any necessity to decide what they *had been*. Or, rather, had become. And this only because different kinds of partnership involved a different disposition of assets on dissolution (Comaroff and Roberts, 1981, pp. 151–53).

Much the same stress on becoming rather than being, on persons and relations as the unfolding product of quotidian social construction, was evident in patterns of inheritance as well. By contrast to European convention, the devolution of estates across the generations was not tied to death. It began, rather, as soon as an individual reached adulthood, set about establishing a

conjugal union, and had children. And it continued, as an ongoing process, throughout the life cycle. Indeed, its success was measured not by how much of a residue of property one had at death, but by how much had been distributed before — and how little had been kept back to become the object of argument among heirs (Comaroff and Roberts, 1981, pp. 175–215). Through the cumulative, gradual disposal of property, men and (to a lesser extent) women realised themselves as parents, spouses, citizens of substance, ancestors-in-the-making; by these means they insinuated, objectified, and embodied themselves in their offspring. And ensured their perpetuity as persons.

As this suggests, the foundational notion of being-as-becoming, of the sentient self as active agent in the world, was so taken-for-granted that it went largely unsaid. Throughout life (in embodied form) and even after death (as a narrated presence), the person was a subject with the potential to engage in the act of completing and augmenting him- or herself. Take just one, very mundane demonstration of the point:

> In 1970, in the course of doing ethnographic fieldwork in Mafikeng, we were sitting in a domestic courtyard with the family of a ward headman, Mhengwa Letsholo. An elderly female neighbor, obviously well past childbearing age, walked across the public meeting space just beyond the homestead wall. 'There goes Mme-Seleka', said the headman's wife, gesturing towards her. 'Mme-' denotes 'mother of', although its connotative fan is rather broad. Trying to place her in social space, one of us asked whether she had sons or daughters. 'Not yet', said the headman, 'No, not yet'. At face value, this seemed a refractory answer: there was no doubt that, given her age, Mme-Seleka was not about to fall pregnant. But it made perfect sense. For one thing, there were conventional means — such as the levirate and sororate — by which offspring might be 'born' to a person who could not physically produce them. But there was another, less pragmatic dimension to Mhengwa's response: to answer in the absolute negative would have been to consign the woman's active life to the past tense, to pronounce her socially dead. As long as she was a sentient being, as long as she was still in the process of becoming, some form of maternity was always possible. 'Not yet' implies the continuous present, just as 'no' puts closure to something that once may have been but now no longer is.

The only time that people stopped 'becoming' was when they fell victim to witchcraft or were 'eaten' by someone more powerful. In the former case, they were either immobilised by illness or mysteriously rendered inert, their capacity for productive activity negated (see Munn, 1986). In the latter, which implied feminisation, they were reduced to dependency and eventually lost all self-determination; typically, they ceased to toil on their own account, working instead at the behest of their masters and patrons. 'Absorbed by another personality' was the way in which one early nineteenth-century missionary-ethnographer described this state of arrested becoming (Willoughby, 1932, p. 227). A second observer, J. Tom Brown (1926, pp. 137–38), wrote an unusu-

ally vivid description of men who, having been thus consumed, suffered an eclipse of their personhood:

> When a man's relatives notice that his whole nature is changed, that the light of the mind is darkened and character has deteriorated so that it may be said that the real manhood is dead, though the body still lives; when they realise that … the human is alienated from … his kith and kin, they apply to him a name (*sebibi* or *sehihi*), which signifies that though the body lives and moves it is only a grave, a place where something has died or been killed. The essential manhood is dead. It is no uncommon thing to hear a person spoken of as being dead when he stands before you visibly alive. When this takes place it always means that there has been an overshadowing of the true relationships of life …

Sefifi [*sehihi*], the term for this state of non-being, is the same as that for 'death pollution'. Interestingly, it describes a condition strikingly similar to the figure of the zombie, which has recently appeared in the South African countryside as part of a moral panic about joblessness in the postcolony (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1999b). It speaks of an erasure of self-determination; of empty shells of humanity who toil mindlessly for others; of a slippage into the passive, past tense. But how, by contrast, do sentient social actors construct themselves? Wherein lies their mode of producing personhood?

On Producing Personhood

The production of personhood here, we reiterate, was an irreducibly social process; this despite — or, perhaps, because of — the fact that, given the workings of the Southern Tswana social universe, initiative lay with individuals for 'building themselves up'. The emphasis on self-construction was embodied, metonymically and metapragmatically, in the idea of *tiro*, labour.[13] *Go dira*, in the vernacular, meant 'to make', 'to do', or 'to cause to happen'. It covered a wide spectrum of activities, from cultivation, cooking, and creating a family to pastoralism, politics, and the performance of ritual (J. Comaroff, 1985; Comaroff and Comaroff, 1991, 140ff). *Tiro* was, still is, generally translated as '[a] work' (Brown, 1931, p. 308), and accented the *act* of fabrication. It yielded value in the form of persons, things, and relations, although it might be undone by sorcery and other malign forces (see below). But *tiro* was not an abstract quality, a commodity to be bought or sold. It could not exist as alienable labour power. Southern Tswana often said that, in the past, even the energies of a serf were not to be exchanged, let alone purchased. They were only available to his or her master by virtue of a *relationship* of interdependence; hints, here, of Hegel. Work, in short, was the positive, relational aspect of human social activity; of the making of self and others in the course of everyday life.

Not only were social beings made and remade by *tiro*, but the product — namely, personhood — was inseparable from the process of production itself. As Alverson (1978, p. 132) has noted, 'an individual not only produce[d] for himself, but actually produce[d] his entitlement to be a social person'. This was captured in the various inflections of *go dira*. Its simple reflexive form, *go itira*,

'to contrive oneself' or 'to pose as', carried ambiguous moral implications. It spoke of antisocial, egocentric self-enhancement; hence the common usage *go itira motho* (lit. 'to make oneself a distinct person') connoted 'to be proud' or 'haughty'. *Go itira* contrasted with *go itirela* — the reflexive extension of *direla* ('work for') — which translated as 'to make (work, do) for oneself' in an affirmative sense. For Tswana in Botswana during the 1970s, according to Alverson (1978, p. 134), *itirela* still referred to the accretion of riches in family and social relations, in cattle and clients, in position and possessions; all of which was also held, hegemonically, to contribute to the common good. The creation of these forms of value was dubbed 'great work' — the effect of which was to extend the self through ties of interdependence, often by means of objects. Thus the significance of property, most notably beasts, was that it both indexed *and* capitalised leverage over people. By extension, power was taken here to be a measure of command within a complex, labile field of material and signal exchanges. Far from being understood in terms of individual autonomy or self-sufficiency, its signature was control over the social production of reality itself.

The concept of self-construction — of *tiro*, 'work' and *itirela*, 'to make [for] oneself' — then, projected a world in which the 'building up' of persons in relation to each other, the accumulation of wealth and rank, and the sustenance of a strong, centralised polity (*morafe*) were indivisible aspects of everyday practice. The object of that practice, minimally, was to avoid social death, to continue producing oneself by producing people and things; maximally, it was to do 'great works'. But just as individuals were presumed to be unequal in their capacity to construct themselves (see above), so not everyone was able to toil in the same kinds of way. Above all, male labour differed from female labour. Before the introduction of the plough — and after it, save for wealthy cultivators — women were associated primarily with agriculture, domesticity, and reproduction. The racial capitalism of the colonial state, and especially of the apartheid regime, played into this by coercing men into migrant wage employment away from home; concomitantly, their wives and daughters remained in the countryside. In addition to subsistence farming, these women were the source of the most basic value of all, human life. But their fertility also yielded polluting heat (*bothitho*) that could spoil the activities of their husbands, fathers, and brothers; even Christian converts evinced concern at this danger. Thus they were said to need physical confinement, denied an active role in the public sphere, and kept away from cattle, the most prized form of capital. Men, by contrast, were cool (*tshididi*): they had the qualities necessary for raising stock, for effective social production, and for the management of the commonweal. While wives did hold fields on their own account, had their own granaries, and exercised some control over the disposal of their harvest, their 'works' — the fruits of their labour pains and labour power (see Jeffery *et al.*, 1989) — provided the material base, the mundane commodities, on which male politics, law, and ritual depended. The point was made repeatedly in Tswana poetics: for example, the origin myth of the male initiation, the most comprehensive of their *rites de passage*, told how society was born when the raw

fertility of females was domesticated by men and put to collective ends (J. Comaroff, 1985).

Personhood, Negation, and Self-Defence

The ongoing process of self-construction was, as we said above, under constant threat of countervailing forces; forces inherent in the social world itself. Because men, especially agnatic rivals, sought to 'eat' one another, and because sorcery was an ever-present danger, work also involved protecting one's self and one's dependents from 'being undone'. *Dirologa*, the reversive extension of *dira*, described this mode of destruction. People took great pains to fortify their homesteads and fields against attack — and sometimes to attack their adversaries, real or imagined, before being hit themselves. Nor was this true only of 'traditionalists'. In the 1930s, Christian elites, deeply committed to 'private interest and competition', were observed — by a Tswana anthropologist — to deploy magical means to doctor their crops and cattle in order to safeguard them;[14] also, to 'get ahead'. We observed the same thing, sometimes fused with Christian ritual, in the 1970s.

Of all the available preventive measures against 'being undone', however, the most fundamental, and the most effective, lay in the fabrication of personhood itself. In anticipation of the postmodern stress on multiple subjectivity, and in a manner evocative of the partible *persona* described for Melanesia (see note 3), Southern Tswana were careful to fragment and refract the self in presenting its exteriors to the world. This derived from an ethnotheory of power/knowledge based on two foundational, if unspoken, axioms. First, because that self was not confined to the corporeal body — it ranged over the sociophysical space-time occupied by the sum total of its relations, presences, enterprises — anything that acted on its traces might affect it for good or ill; which is why human beings could be attacked through their footprints, immobilised by curses, enabled by ancestral invocation, undermined or strengthened by magical operations on their houses, their clothes, or their animals. Second, to the degree that anyone was 'known' to others, she or he became vulnerable to their machinations, to being consumed by them. Conversely, empowerment, protective or predatory, lay in the capacity to conceal: to conceal purposes, possessions, propensities, practices — and, even more subtly, to conceal concealment, to hide the fact that anything at all was being hidden.

Put the two axioms together and the corollary is obvious: it made sense only to present partial, refractory aspects of one's person — of one's property, projects, interests — to the various others who shared the same coordinates of the life- world. Hence the people with whom an individual worked, or engaged in economic enterprises, were shown a single facet; political allies saw another; those with whom s/he prayed or played, yet another; and so on. Clearly, given the nature of everyday existence here, and the local predilection for gossip and scandal, there were inevitable overlaps; boundaries were breached, what was masked occasionally became transparent. Still, the effort to sustain the partibility of personhood, thus to empower the self and its undertakings, was a

fundamental premise of being-through-becoming. So much so that it went utterly unremarked. But it was revealed, at the one moment in the life-cycle at which the coherence of biography was enacted: death. Echoes, *here*, of Sartrean existentialism.

The integration of the fractal human subject occurred toward the end of his or her funeral. In a public ceremony known as *tatolo*, people arose to narrate that part of the career of the deceased of which they, in particular, knew; and so, piece by piece, a composite portrait emerged, a life took shape from its shards. In the 1970s, we were told more than once that *tatolo* was the most engaging part of a burial — not least to mourning relatives, for whom the synoptic accounting was sometimes as much as a surprise as it was to relative strangers. In a universe in which social knowledge was a matter of insatiable interest and informational value, it is no wonder that *tatolo* held such fascination: it represented an existential *denouement*, the summation of a biography that had, until now, been an inscrutable work-in-progress. And was about to move onto an altogether different, even less scrutable plane. In the case of persons of power, the fascination grew exponentially: *tatolo* stood to reveal their ways and means, their secrets of being-and-becoming, in this complex, labyrinthine social world.

Conclusion: the Dialectics of Encounter

The Southern Tswana conception of personhood, in sum, was part and parcel of a distinct, historically-wrought universe of meaning and action; an Afro-modernist universe in which labour, the self, and the social were mutually constituting. Shades, here, of Marx. This conception was at once different and yet similar to its European counterpart. The latter had come to be represented, ideologically, in the liberal language of possessive individualism (Macpherson, 1962), a language alien to vernacular African experience — especially because it appeared to background the social, to relegate it to mere 'context'. But, *pace* the conventions of Western knowledge, the antinomy between Euro-individualism and African communitarianism, past and present, is profoundly misleading. For one thing, as anthropologists never tire of pointing out, personhood, however it may be culturally formulated, is *always* a social creation — just as it is *always* fashioned by the exigencies of history. This is as true in Europe and the USA as it is in Africa or Asia; as true of the eighteenth as it is of the twenty-first century. And it remains true under epochal conditions in which the very existence of Society is called into question. Or even, as in Britain of the Thatcher years (Tester, 1992; Comaroff and Comaroff, 1999a), flatly denied.

Similarly the stress on the social and communitarian foundations of African personhood. Nowhere in Africa were ideas of individuality ever absent (Lienhardt, 1985). Individual*ism*, another creature entirely, might not have been at home here before the postcolonial age; not, at least, outside of Protestant elites. But, each in their own way, African societies *did*, in times past, have a place for individuality, personal agency, property, privacy, biography, signature, and authored action upon the world. What differed was their particular substance, the manner of their ontological embeddedness in the social, their ideological

formulation. All of which ought to underscore, yet again, why crude contrasts between European and African selfhood — or the reduction of either to essentialising, stereotypic adjectives of difference — make little sense; why sociological and semantic similarities may be obscured by dissimilarities in languages of representation.

In this respect, Michael Welker has offered the term 'autoplexy' to signify the mode of personhood we describe for the late colonial Tswana world:[15] a mode of personhood, as he glosses it, which involved 'playing with' a multiplicity of shifting roles and identities to secure freedom of action and social position. This form of play in a fluid, intricate field of relations, Welker concludes, produced something analogous in Africa to the autonomous individual of the post-Enlightenment Western imagination. Perhaps. The more fundamental point, however, is that the idea of 'autoplexy', and the analysis to which it applies, seeks to pay due regard to the sheer complexity of African ideas of personhood. Also to treat them as parallel to, and commensurate with, their European counterpart; as their coeval rather than their benighted precursor.

We have situated this account in the late colonial period, not in 'traditional' Africa. As we intimated at the outset, no such thing exists, least of all in respect of the signs and practices of personhood. Among Southern Tswana, those signs and practices altered a great deal over the long-run. In part, this was due to the encounter with Protestant missionaries, who evangelised the South African interior from the 1820s onwards, and who bore with them a strong commitment to liberal individualism and right-bearing selfhood. The Protestants essayed contradictory perceptions of Tswana subjectivity. On one hand, 'the natives' were described as 'primitive communists', savages with no individuality or sense of self; yet they were constantly accused of brute 'selfishness' and 'greed', even of a lack of 'natural affection' for others.[16] All of which made it necessary to instill in them a capacity for self-possession and an appreciation of refined individualism. For their part, Southern Tswana found the Europeans — whose idea of labour lacked the grammatical range and subtle semantic inflections of *tiro* — to be perverse in their insistence on private property and individual rights. To translate the discourse of toil into the vernacular, the Christians put *itira*, 'to contrive oneself' (in the morally ambiguous, self-seeking sense of the term) over *itirela*, 'to make oneself' in a positive, socially accountable manner. What is more, they stressed the value of contracts, titles, and deeds, a mode of textualising relations that, to the Africans, appeared to make humans into 'paper persons'; it also disembedded exchange from its social referents and rendered visible what ought to be concealed, thus opening people up to being 'eaten' more easily than before. To wit, the reduction of material transactions to these instruments of legality was referred to, by Tswana in the 1880s, as 'the English mode of warfare' (Mackenzie 1887, pp. 1, 80).

As this suggests, the dialectics of encounter were far from straightforward. For all the differences between European and Tswana sensibilities, Euro-Christian concepts of self and virtuous labour had strong resonances with indigenous notions of 'great work' and being-as-becoming. As a consequence, the transcultural discourse of personhood here bore within it a number of legible,

transitive signs; signs that pointed toward an ideological conjuncture for those who drew near to the church, adopted the practices of bourgeois civility, and entered the black elites spawned by colonial political economy. It also set in train a long conversation among Southern Tswana themselves about selfhood and civilisation (see e.g. Molema, 1920; Plaatje, 1996) — a conversation modulated by processes of class formation and social distinction. While some found the liberal individualism of *sekgoa* ('European ways') highly appealing and took on its terms, others repudiated it entirely, even while being affected by it. Yet others forged hybridity out of the antinomy. They still do.

The conversation continues today across the northern reaches of the South African countryside, albeit in altered circumstances. Indeed, it is has become more fervent as anxieties over the future of 'community' and 'culture', now named as such, grow into a populist postcolonial obsession. Amidst gathering talk of human rights and civil society, of the celebration of autochthony and authenticity, the vision of an African Renaissance arises to counter the rampant excesses of European modes of being-in-the world.

John L. and Jean Comaroff may be contacted at Department of Anthropology, University of Chicago, 1126 E 59th Street, Chicago, Illinois, 60637, USA, e-mail: jeancom@uchicago.edu, jl-comaroff@uchicago.edu.

Notes

1. We are hardly the first to ask this question, of course. See, for just one example, Burridge (1979, p. 4). The individual, he says, lies 'at the center of our civilisation'. Is 'the development of [this figure] a universal in human experience, or is it in some sense culturally specific?'.
2. Also one with a complex history, as Mauss ([1938] 1985) classically pointed out; see also MacFarlane (1978). Mauss, whose own characterisation of the development of personhood was distinctly evolutionary, took pains to point out that 'other societies have held very different notions of the self, and [that] each society's notion is intimately connected with its form of social organisation' (Carrithers *et al.*, 1985, p. vii); echoes here, too, of Durkheim, for whom the modern person is a 'product of specific social factors' (Collins, 1985, p. 63).
3. Similarly, for example, Melanesian notions of personhood, as Konrad (1998, p. 645) has recently reminded us, citing the seminal work of Strathern (1988) and Wagner (1991), among others; for a rather different, older account, however, see Read (1955) — and, on the contrast between Melanesia and India, Busby (1997).
4. We make this point, albeit briefly and illustratively, in Bhabha and Comaroff (forthcoming). We shall take it up in more detail in the near future.
5. On the ethnogenesis of 'the' Southern Tswana peoples during the early colonial period, see Comaroff and Comaroff (1997, pp. 387–95; 1991, pp. 306–8); also, more generally, on the construction of ethnic identity, see J.L. Comaroff (1987a).

6. The person, in short, was irreducible to an autonomous *individual*. A point of definitional clarification is in order here. As La Fontaine (1985, pp. 124–26) notes, orthodox anthropological usage has long distinguished the person from both the individual and the self. The individual refers to a biologically distinct, socially discrete, indivisible being, a unity of body and mind; the person, to an ensemble of social roles and relations; the self, to a unique identity. In analytic practice, however, this distinction is often blurred; to be sure, it is difficult to sustain — especially in the West, where, given the ideological predominance of individualism (see MacFarlane, 1978; Dumont, 1970), there has long been a tendency to collapse the person into the individual, and both into the self. In late colonial Africa, there is the opposite tendency: to see the individual purely in terms of personhood.
7. The received opposition between ascription and achievement, like many of the great antimonies of modernist social theory, has played a major part in stereotypic (mis)perceptions of 'African personhood'; note, again, the spurious singular. We would argue that nowhere in Africa does an 'ascriptive' society (or, indeed, one of 'organic solidarity') exist outside of the imagination of social theorists (see J.L. Comaroff, 1978).
8. See, classically, Murphy and Kasdan (1959, 1967); also, Barth (1973) and Comaroff and Roberts (1981, pp. 31–33). For here, it is enough to note that unions among close kin have the effect of generating relations that are overlapping and inherently ambiguous, relations at once agnatic, matrilateral and affinal. Among Tswana these forms of connection carried quite different, even inimical, social expectations; they had, therefore, to be reduced to one thing or another in the pragmatic course of everyday life — which, *of necessity*, made them an ongoing object of negotiation (see Comaroff and Comaroff, 1981).
9. They form the predominant population of neighbouring Botswana as well; but we are concerned here with those Southern Tswana who live in the Northwest Province of South Africa. Due to the unreliability of census data published by the apartheid regime, and to the fact that ethnic identities have long been somewhat malleable in this part of the world, it is impossible to establish the precise number of Tswana in the country. Somewhere in excess of 1.5 million is probably a fair estimate, however.
10. See, in this respect, Marks (1978) on Zululand.
11. For an account of the ways in which rules of rank and status were negotiated, see J.L. Comaroff (1978); also, see again note 8 for the effect of endogamous marriage practices on the ambiguity and negotiability of social ties.
12. It is striking how — at least until recently in the history of anthropological thought — marriage featured as *the* atom of social formation in all major theoretical traditions. Thus, for example, notwithstanding their differences, structural functionalist and structuralist approaches, in the guise of descent and alliance theory, agreed that marriage rules (especially prohibitions) were fundamental in the construction of non-Western societies; for foundational works, see e.g. Fortes (1953, 1969) and Levi-Strauss (1969). Even revisionist Marxist approaches emphasised the significance of marriage

and its prestations for structuring relations of production and exploitation in 'precapitalist formations' (see e.g. Meillassoux, 1964, 1972, 1981; Collier, 1988).

13. Elsewhere (1987) we deal at length with the opposition between *tiro*, self-possessed labour, and *mmèrèkò* (from *bereka*, [Afrikaans]), wage work for others, usually whites. The contrast between these two terms — each had a broad fan of referents — was of enormous salience to Southern Tswana in the late colonial years. It underlay the way in which they imagined, and navigated, South African economy and society under apartheid.
14. See Comaroff and Comaroff (1997, pp. 153–54) for details. The anthropologist was Z.K. Matthews, one of South Africa's great black scholars and political figures, whose field notes are housed in the Botswana National Archives.
15. Welker outlined his concept of *autoplexy* to us in a letter (Heidelberg, 16 September 1998): 'a person's playing and shifting with a multiplicity of ascribed and assumed roles and identity patterns to secure individual freedom and importance, in short: to use this sort of complexity in analogous ways to the use of modern autonomy'. Clearly, the concept is intended to elide *autonomy* with *complexity*. We have paraphrased Welker's words here to fit more closely the terms of our own analysis.
16. For detailed references, see Comaroff and Comaroff (1991, 1997); also, for a specific case, Dachs (1972, p. 695).

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