Chapter Four

Colonialism, Christianity, and Personhood

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The crucial impact of colonialism and Christianity on African personhood is a double one. It is a received (precolonial) being-with and a modernist (European capitalist) consciousness: "two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (Du Bois 1989: 5). The dialectic of African personhood oscillates between subjectivity fashioned by an African sense of communion and individualistic orientation, being African yet feeling Western, and yearning for native Africanness but grasping at alien European cosmopolitanism. Africans labor under the weight of a crisis of personhood, self-identity, and a split self that is a legacy of Christianity and colonialism.

When Christianity and colonialism arrived in Africa, Africans already had their own well-rounded personhood, but they worked against this to refashion it. A notion of relational personhood was central to life in African community long before the intrusion of Christian missionaries and colonialism. The affirmation of a person as being-with, being in communion with others was not just important in relation to infrastructure nor was it just necessary to the good life: it was the very center of a flourishing life. This personhood – one that is central to the production and reproduction of life – was framed in terms of a vision of meaningful order in the cosmos. To act reasonably toward the good life was to act in accordance with this meaningful order. Under the dual influence of colonialism and Christianity, African personhood was something to be refashioned by altering the

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traditional worldview and social imaginary. Christianity and colonialism also altered African patterns of consumption, modes of exchange, and the cultivation of land; they shaped desires, created a taste for European attire, and worked to develop disciplined bodies and pious hearts for Western ideals. The new personhood was to come largely through a total transformation of everyday life. The idea that personhood could be (re)constructed through the physicality of everyday life was something that was taken seriously by both missionaries and colonialists. For them, rejiggered African personhood would construct subjects and subjectivity as fitting signifiers of an internal acceptance of God and empire (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997: 218–220).

For centuries Christianity and colonialism squeezed Africans on every side, trying to make them subjects of God and empire. Both empires – the empire of the spirit and the empire of the European powers – attempted to claim Africans for themselves. And this squeezing forced Africans to fight against both in order to forge a new African personhood. Their battle was and still is a triple struggle, with three antagonists: one (being-with) presses them from origins, another (Christianity) blocks their path toward the benefits of the past, and the third (European modernist) supports the second in blocking the road but drives them onto an entirely different path, to the place of split identity. These struggles and encounters contribute to the formation of African personhood in the twenty-first century as an *other within*.

This chapter is a study of the encounters between African personhood and missionary Christianity and colonialism. Encounter is the ur-theme of personhood: a person becomes a person in their encounters with other persons in their community (Tillich 1954: 78). In the community that was created in the "long conversation" and confrontation between Africans and Europeans (as missionaries and colonial administrators), between tradition and "civilization," between domination and resistance, encounters occurred in multiple registers and in the intimacies of everyday African life. What kind of African personhood was forged or perceived by the African and European actors in the dialectics of the encounters?

I shall seek the answers to this question through three lenses. First, I shall provide an analysis of the "weight of blackness" as borne by Africans during colonialism and the colonial Christian mission. This involves an examination of some of the linkages between race, colonialism, Christianity, and African selfhood (basic humanity). Scholars such as Waibinte Wariboko adopt this approach to explain the impact of colonialism and Christianity on African personhood. He draws his examples principally from the Church Missionary Society (CMS) mission in West Africa. His overall conclusion is that the encounter led to the degradation of the worth of the African self (W. Wariboko 2011).

Second, I shall offer a brief study of the formation of African subjects of God and empire founded on "rationalistic" competitive individualism. The work of John and Jean Comaroff is exemplary in this regard. The Comaroffs argue that

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African personhood as it emerged in Tswana, South Africa, during the colonial era, was a working out of British personhood on African soil over a span of a "long conversation" focused on the black body in everyday practices (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991, 1997).

Finally, I shall examine the philosophical basis of the traditional African notion of personhood (a form of being-with or relationality), and use it to interrogate the impact of Africa's encounter with Christianity and colonialism on African personhood. The object is to understand how precolonial African personhood shapes the postcolonial Christian world after enduring the weight of blackness under colonialism and after passing through the dogged efforts of colonial mission to make it Western.

Christianity, colonialism, and the weight of blackness

My goal here is to present a portrait of African personhood during the colonial mission (that is, the work of European sociopolitical, economic, and religious subjugations of Africans in the era of colonialism) as a weight of blackness that Africans had to endure. During the period of colonialism and missionary Christianity the encounters between Africans and whites were characterized by unrelenting aesthetic and racial judgments that portrayed black skin as debased. Christianity and colonialism "positioned Christian [and modern identities] fully within European (white) identity and fully outside the identity of [Africans]" (Jennings 2010: 33; parentheses original). Africans could forge their identities only as they bore the enormous weight of their skin color. The weight of blackness is the burden of socially imposed sufferings on Africans, the sense of the weight of race made palpable by the intensification of suffering imposed by the external forces of racialized colonial power and colonial mission. We should pay particular attention to how the heavy weight of blackness affected Africans' sense of self and how Europeans displayed black personhood disrespectfully across many registers of interracial social interactions. It appears that under colonialism and missionary Christianity almost all black–white encounters were forced to bear the load of race and racism. For example, the weight was felt in sacred Christian spaces, on black women's pudenda, on black male bodies, and in the moral, intellectual, and aesthetic evaluation of blackness.

One fateful Sunday in 1754 in South Africa, a 16-year-old slave named Jephta van de Caab, carrying his master's coat and parasol, entered a church when whites were still in it and in doing so brushed against some white men, including the Lord Fiscal and other high government officials. Jephta was "punished exemplarily as a deterrent to other similar vile scoundrels" and was "severely scourged with rods on his bare back" (Vernal 2011: 14). He was punished, according to Fiona Vernal, because he had contravened a law, which demanded that slaves be particularly careful as to how they entered sacred Christian spaces: "On Sundays and holidays, the slaves are forbid [*sic*] to come into the church or porch at the

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end of the Divine Service or as the congregation are going out, or from making noise or committing any wantonness during church time, on pain of, if caught in the fact, being severely flogged."[1] The bodies of nonwhites like Jeptha were surveilled and forced to conform to certain comportments as demanded by social and physical boundaries between them and white bodies in colonial society. Nonwhites who transgressed the color boundaries were sometimes executed by being broken on the wheel or on a cross (gibbet).

Colonialism or Christian mission was not only about organizing bodies, but was also about facilitating phallic power over the black women's vaginas. In August 1727 a 32-year-old white knegt, Theunis Roelofsz van Christaainsand, raped a Khoikhoi woman named Crebis, drove an iron bolt into her vagina, put buttermilk into it, and murdered her son Casper, who tried to protect her honor. As a black woman in eighteenth-century Cape Colony, South Africa, Crebis had little protection from abuse by white people. When the case went to trial, her rapist won, as the court accepted his account of the case, whereby he argued that he did not rape her, or violate her with an iron bolt, or put buttermilk into her vagina. The testimonies of two Asian slaves who witnessed the brutal rape and testified on her behalf did not count in this so-called Christian society dominated by the Dutch (Penn 2014). Dutch colonialism and Reformed Church Christianity constituted a heavy weight on blacks during this period. The Christian colonialists, often working in cohort with the Dutch East India Company (Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie, or VOC) did not think much of the worth of Africans.

In the trial, Roelofsz, a servant of VOC, drew on crude representations of Africans, especially African women, for his defense. He argued that he did not rape Crebis, but rather offered her an iron bolt and tobacco, and she chose tobacco. This was a subtle reference to the image of African women as lustful that he hoped would resonate with the European judge of the case. Well over a hundred years before this trial Europeans in South Africa propagated the view that Khoikhoi women would expose their pudenda to visitors for small gifts or that these African women possessed an abnormally long nymphae (labia minora) (Penn 2014: 14–15). They also portrayed African men as possessing unusually large and permanently erect penises. According to Nigel Penn,

> European travel literature of this time, when discussing the inhabitants of Africa, commonly attributed to Africans, in general, a promiscuous sexuality. African women, in particular, were portrayed as being sexually insatiable and immoral. As a number of authors have pointed out this deliberate denigration of Africans was not unconnected with attempts to justify the increasing enslavement of Africans by Europeans. The depiction of African women as being more sexually voracious than African men is partly explicable by the fact that writers of such descriptions, who were themselves males, saw women as being more "other" than men. (Penn 2014: 14–15)

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The violent penetration of the black Crebis by the white Roelofsz, with his fleshy phallus and the phallic iron bolt, and the descriptions of African sexuality with their foci on the black woman's sexual organs, were aspects of racism and its discursive practice of representing Africa as a body to be penetrated at will by colonial forces. Such discourses and practices render the African body open, inviting the domination and intrusion of others or of powers (spirits). The discourse of Western imperial ventures in Africa emphasized connections between domination and the opening of the body, accenting Africa as an open feminine body being penetrated by masculine Western powers. As Anne Norton remarks,

> Colonies were established by the desire for and the penetration of other, the "opening up" of the body politic. The discourse of colonialism personified both empire and the colony (and imperialists and colonies) in terms of open and closed, masculine and feminine. The colonized were read as open, identified either as feminine or as open, penetrable, male bodies. (Norton 2002: 18–19)

To portray the African body as an open body (or one that surrenders totally to the powers that are beyond the self) is to set it against the grain of the Western conception of personhood, against the European understanding of sovereign, autonomous personhood. At the individual level, as argued by Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, modernity understands sovereignty as closeness. The closed body (not subject to intrusions or violations by others) living in a closed material existence (that is, not penetrated by spirits) is a precondition of freedom and the sheltering and flourishing of the mind (Norton 2002: 17–19). So the obsession with the denigration of the black body as open and penetrable was one way of placing African personhood below Western personhood, which in turn created the imperious need to refashion it.

Colonialism and colonial mission paid special attention to the African body as a way of distorting or transforming African personhood to suit their vision of what Africans should be. The surfaces of black bodies, their consumption and coverings, habits and practices, were subject to European gaze and control. The presentation of black bodies in the public, their intake and output, and their coverings had to become signs of Western or Christian forms and essences. Africans must be compelled to present their bodies and public comportment as indices of their belonging to modern civilization. First and foremost, according to the logic of domination of colonialism and the disciplinary regime of Christianity, Africans had to be transformed into law-abiding subjects. This started with the insistence that black bodies regard white bodies as imbued with prestige and authority – as we saw in Jephta's case. Violence, quick and brutal force, meted out on black bodies was a central principle of the colonial domination of Africa and a crucial part of the racial scale of personhood, which placed European personhood at the apex and African personhood at the bottom.

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The British colonial administrator Harold Monday Douglas, who worked in eastern Nigeria from 1897 to 1920, ruled with great brutal force, as if to remind blacks daily of white supremacy. He forced Igbo chiefs and villagers to provide labor for colonial road projects. When they refused he destroyed their houses, farms, and crops, and further punished them in violent ways. On several occasions his brutal actions caused the death of Igbo leaders. He would order the public flogging of Nigerian workers, young men, and chiefs. On one occasion, according to Toyin Falola (2009: 29), "He beat a government interpreter, a Nigerian, to a state of unconsciousness."

This kind of brutal attack on African personhood derived its impetus from the European racial scale and from the firm belief of its adherents that no degree of degradation of Africans by whites would ever call into question the superiority and unassailable moral high ground of white personhood. Lord Frederick Lugard, the well-known colonial administrator in Nigeria, argued that authoritarianism was necessary to civilize Africans, even if its implementation led to the death of Africans. He wrote in 1915: "I do not regret the loss of life among aggressors, for these people hold life so cheap that the only way to prevent a recurrence of the outbreak is to make them understand that it will be severely dealt with."[2] According to this bizarre logic, the death of Africans who resisted the colonial invasion and the penetration of their body politic by alien forces does not count for anything: the criminal acts of whites were justified because their African victims, with their cheap regard for life, asked for them. Lugard went further to suggest that European criminals were created with such distinctive moral fiber that acts of cruelty performed by them against Africans would never weaken their moral constitution. He argued that British officers like Douglas faced no moral danger because they would not fall "prey to that subtle moral deterioration which the exercise of power over inferior races produces in men of a different type and which finds expression in cruelty" (Lugard 1922: 132). If all this sounds far-fetched, recall that colonial powerhouses like Lord Lugard believed that the European presence in Africa in the forms of Christianity, colonialism, and commerce was salvific, that is, geared to bringing order to chaos, civility to "savages," progress to Africa, and above all redemption to perishing black souls.

If cruelty was not driven by a delusional colonial messianic complex, it was certainly moved by deliberate, callous attempts to keep Africans poor and their personhood etiolated. One would have difficulty finding a better exemplum of such callousness than the collaboration and conspiracy between missionaries, colonial authorities, and colonial settlers in the Belgian Congo. As documented in *Avenir Colonial Belge* on October 30, 1921, Jules Renguin, the minister of colonies, had a meeting with Catholic missionaries to work out an agreement between them that would keep Africans subjected to Belgium. He instructed them to work only for the interests of Belgium, and to use their interpretation of the Bible to facilitate this objective:

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> Let us have the courage to confess that you have not come here to teach Africans what they already know. Your role essentially consists in facilitating the job for administrators and manufacturers. This therefore is to say that you will interpret the gospel in the way that best serves our interests in this part of the world.[3]

Perhaps most reprehensible in this document were the specific instructions that the minister of colonies gave the missionaries on how to achieve the goals of subsuming African to Belgian interests. He set out a plan to perpetuate the poverty of Africans through religious subterfuge and calculated misinterpretation of the Sermon on the Mount:

> Among other things, you will see to it to make our "savages" lose interest in the material wealth their soil and subsoil are brimming with, in order to avoid that being interested in, they bloody not compete with us, and dream of evicting us some day. Your knowledge of the Scriptures easily will help you find passages which recommend and get people to love poverty. For instance, passages like "Blessed are the poor, for the kingdom of heavens belongs to them"; and "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of the needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." You will therefore do everything so that Blacks may be afraid of becoming rich in order to deserve Heaven. (quoted in Ayedze 2009: 200)

This brings us to the discursive control of Christian missionaries and colonialism over Africans. Christian missionaries and colonial authorities firmly framed how Africans themselves and the rest of the world should interpret, evaluate, and accept blackness and African personhood. The following section bridges the historical approach to African personhood under colonialism and Christian missionary activity (as exemplified by Waibinte Wariboko) and the historical-anthropological method (as exemplified by the Comaroffs).

African personhood and Western discursive practices

The control of discursive practices over African identity revolved around the common conceptual constant of race and racism. Within these practices whiteness was exalted and blackness denigrated. Both agents of the colonial state and of Christian missions, in their "civilizing mission" quest, cast aspersions on African personhood as a foil for an imagined new Euro-African personhood. Africans were considered only as *potential* persons, and as requiring the graces of the civilizing mission under the aegis of Christianity and the colonial state to attain full personhood (W. Wariboko 2011: 40–41). Both church agents (black and white) and officers of the colonial state expressed these views: they all denigrated African personhood even as in many cases they worked assiduously to serve Africans faithfully.

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Let us hear from some of them. First, Samuel Ajayi Crowther, the first black bishop of the Church of England stated:

> The "Dark Continent" is properly applied to Africa. The inhabitants of a great portion of it are very *ignorant*, being *illiterate*, *unlettered*, *untaught*; all what they know is what was got by tradition from their forefathers, and handed down from generation; they are therefore rude, barbarous, unmerciful, [and] superstitious.[4]

White missionaries enunciated similar views. For instance, Father Lutz, the founder of the Spiritan mission to Igboland wrote in a letter to his nephew: "All those who go to Africa as missionaries must be thoroughly penetrated with the thought that the Dark Continent is a cursed land, almost entirely in the power of the devil."[5] Almost nothing was spared in their condemnation of Africa. A CMS representative inveighed against Ganda domestic architecture in 1902:

> There was no home among them and their houses were an outward symbol of that sad fact. They were round, very dark inside, having only those opening; there were no partitions beyond those made by hanging bark clothes … It could not be a wholesome life. (quoted in Isichei 1995: 83)

Joseph Chamberlain, the British secretary of states for the colonies, described Africa as characterized by "practices of barbarism, of slavery, of superstition, which for centuries have desolated the interior of Africa" (W. Wariboko 2013: 143).

These views of the inferiority of Africans pervaded the missionary and colonial worlds, as Waibinte Wariboko observes:

> First, white supremacy from the outset of European involvement in Africa was constitutive, not additive to the makings of the civilizing mission. Second, because the desire to enthrone whiteness was constitutive to the makings of the civilizing mission from the outset, antiblack discourses in knowledge production about Africa and Africans were integral, not marginal, to the European empire-building project in the continent. Finally, the constructions of race and the civilizing mission were firmly rooted in attempts to rationalize the global social and psychological domination of non-European populations during the age of European expansion. (2013: 140)

The denigration of African personhood was not only a celebration of white supremacy, but also a consequence of the phallic will-to-power which must open Africa's interiors for the masculine European gaze to penetrate *her*: "For by portraying the real Africa as a dark recess, much akin to a bodily interior, it suggested that there was an intrinsic value in laying it bare to the probing eye of the European observer" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991: 90). To know Africa in this way was also to feminize it, allowing its supposedly seductively helpless sub-personhood to be subjugated and mounted by the manly European super-personhood. In the nineteenth century this kind of discursive practice became clinically extended

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to – mapped and sedimented onto – the body of a real black woman, Sara Baartman, the "Hottentot Venus" who was exhibited at circuses as a "wild" woman. When she eventually died in Paris in 1815, European biologists examined her vagina meticulously for signs of aberrations, and declared that her labia minora were excessive and hence she was subhuman. According to the Comaroffs, European missionaries, colonialists, and scientists

> reduced Africa to the body of a black female yielding herself to white male discovery. This mytheme … was repeated in both the poetry of romantic naturalists and the sober prose of missionary crusaders … The feminization of the black "other" was a potent trope of devaluation. The non-European was to be made as peripheral to the global axes of reason and production as women had become at home. Both were vital to the material and imaginative order of modern Europe. Yet both were deprived of access to its highest values. (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991: 104–105; see also Comaroff and Comaroff 1997)

Overall, this discursive regime worked to enact white privilege in Africa, placing whites essentially in a godlike position over African lives and creating a huge power distance between whites and blacks. Europeans considered themselves as superior masters and full human beings and Africans as helpless servants and only potential human beings. "Part of the self-image of the European in Africa was his prescriptive right to have black servants" (Ranger 1997: 600). During colonial times, it was very normal to see Europeans (missionaries and colonialists) on a journey carried on hammock by black men. According to Terrence Ranger, there was no impulse toward brotherhood in colonial Christianity (Africa). "For most Europeans the favoured image of their relationship with Africans was that of paternal masters and loyal servant. It was an image transferred to industrial [and public] employment." (Ranger 1997: 600).

With such a huge power distance it was not a huge step to declare that the subalterns do not have any organizational or managerial capabilities. Lord Lugard stated that the African "lacks the power of organization and is conspicuously deficient in the management and control alike of men or business" (1922: 70). That is, the European person and personhood were capable of leading and commanding themselves and others, but the African person and personhood were not. As the faces of the brutal, authoritarian European masters, the colonial district and resident officers exemplified this administrative philosophy in their dealings with Africans. In their exalted positions they were like gods, father figures, or ancestral spirits. More pompous and dictatorial than the district officer, the resident officer in his domain was answerable to no one. The wronged African could sometimes "appeal" from the district officer to the resident officer, but with the latter there was no recourse. His rulings were "settled in heaven" and were questioned only at dire personal risk and at the risk of the "wrath of hell fire" (Dudley 1973: 38).

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This administrative model certainly did not take African personhood seriously, but not all European missionaries or colonial officers were racists or enjoyed debasing African personhood. There were moments of affirmation of what is African amid the overwhelming climate of denigration. There were evangelists and colonialists who were different from Lugard, Douglas, Renquin, and the scientists who examined the reproductive organs of black women for signs of their subhumanity. One was Bishop John William Colenso, who worked to superimpose or construct Christian and Western civilizations in Africa on the foundation of native African logic. In the mid-nineteenth century Colenso, the first Anglican bishop of Natal in South Africa, translated the New Testament and portions of the Old Testament into isiZulu, fought for the rights of Africans and against the injustice done to blacks, even against his good friend Theophilus Shepstone, an administrator of native affairs who ruled the colony for 30 years. In terms of the impact of his work on African personhood, however, there was no substantive difference between Colenso and Lugard. Their ways and attitudes, though substantially different, eventually worked to undermine African personhood, coalescing in the telos of refashioning African ways of life to suit the logics of capitalist accumulation and colonialism. Colenso's theology, which posited universal salvation on the basis of a common religious consciousness available to all peoples, denied that any particular identity (even Jewish) is of importance to God or mattered theologically. In this discursive framework, African identity or personhood was displaced in favor of a universal one. But, as William Jennings points out: "Colenso's universalism undermines all forms of identity except that of the colonists" and was blind to the dispossession of families, the driving of Africans off their lands and into wage labor (2010: 145). As he puts it, Colenso's universalism is another form of colonialism's reconfiguration of the earth:

> Colenso's universalism was the other side of his colonialism. His ability to conceptualize a God who is not only beyond but in some sense opposed to the strictures of Jewish identity draws life from colonialist abilities to universalize the earth, that is, to free life from the strictures of particular ways of God of life. Of course, missionary life is by its proper nature boundary crossing, but his universalist vision reduces the power and presence of the very things it claims to grasp, the particularities of African peoples. He resolves those particularities into signposts for potential development. (Jennings 2010: 146)

The history of Christianity's relationship with African personhood is a complicated one. The translation process started by missionaries like Colenso and the Western education Africans received from Christian missionaries eventually helped to disrupt and deconstruct the colonialist hegemony. Lamin Sanneh thus argues that

> mission furnished nationalism with the resources necessary to its rise and appeal [success], whereas colonialism came upon nationalism as a conspiracy. At the heart

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> of the nationalist awakening was the cultural ferment [pride] that missionary translations and the attendant linguistic research stimulated. We might say with justice that mission begot cultural nationalism. (2009: 144)

Translation and missionary education opened up a space for indigenous self-understanding and resistance to the absolutizing image of Western superiority, even as they worked to translate "native worlds into the old worlds of Europe, that is, into colonialist worlds" (Jennings 2010: 157). In their study of Tswana the Comaroffs show that this bigger form of translation was forged through a "long conversation" between indigenous culture and Western culture as played out in everyday forms of life.

Everyday assaults on African personhood

The notion of personhood that both colonialists and Christian evangelists brought to Africa was that of autonomous, competitive, right-bearing individuals seeking to maximize their well-being, and was heavily invested in visions of heroic transformation of the universe (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991: 61–62). African personhood was considered as its obverse (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997: 371). Not only did colonialists and missionaries claim that Africans lacked the social structures to develop a propertied, right-bearing personhood, but as "savages" they lacked "reason," the required level of intellectual development on which the European notion of personhood rested (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997: 372). It was therefore the burden of whites to transform the Africans into enlightened, right-bearing, right-minded, self-interested, and reasoning human beings. This they sought to achieve through dogma, revelation, and everyday forms of colonizing culture. This is what the Comaroffs call the "long conversation" between missionaries and colonialists on the one hand and Africans on the other, and it was directed at passing an alien subjectivity and selfhood on to Africans (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997: 250–251).

The quotidian practices of colonialism and colonial Christianity, aimed at refashioning African personhood in every way possible, focused on the black body to carefully manage the linkages between bodily politics and body politic (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997: 374). As the Comaroffs remark:

> If the body personal was metonymic of body politic, the reformation of the second might follow from the refashioning of the first. What is more, this objective, the reworking of bodily practices, was best achieved by intervening in the mundanities of [African] life. (1997: 374)

Ordinary life became the site of struggles for African personhood. As missionaries and colonialists focused on the myriad things the black body had to do, to conform to, or to reject within the colonial disciplinary regime, African personhood and its

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indigenous philosophical underpinnings came under severe attack. Yet Africans did not completely lose their ingrained indigenous notion of personhood.

Crisis of African personhood: From the traditional to hybrid forms

In spite of the spirited efforts of colonialists and missionaries to reconstruct African personhood along the lines of Western personhood, the precolonial notion of personhood survived to shape African worlds both under colonialism and in the postcolonial era. In this section, I examine the indigenous philosophical notion of personhood as another way of gauging the impact of colonialism and Christianity on African personhood.

It would be impossible to analyze the conceptions of personhood in all African communities.[6] I will, therefore, draw on Kalabari-Ijo (Niger Delta, Nigeria) as an example to make my case.[7] The Kalabari understanding of personhood rests on communion, but holds in tension the particularity of being (personal distinctiveness) and the commonality of human nature (ontological equality). It is a relational personhood that accents inclusiveness, mutuality, and communion.

This understanding derives from an ontology that manages to avoid the usual extremes in Western philosophy. On the one hand, it opposes a simple sort of metaphysical ontology that reduces all conceptions of personhood to a changeless common substance. On the other hand, it avoids a radical kind of relational ontology that takes the human as totally relationally constituted or socially constructed. The African ontology of personhood thus avoids the Scylla of metaphysics as well as the Charybdis of social ontology. It attempts to establish a sort of relational ontology on the basis of nonfixed substance. Being is not a changeless substance (*ousia*) but *as it relates to* (i.e., substance-in-relation). Being is an active and open form that is continually adjusting and improvising its relation to other being, to nonbeing, and to the world. The power of being is an active relational principle, a substance that is shared by all human beings and that connects all things and persons. Thus a person exists by being in communion with others, in sharing this communalizing power. Put differently, it is in relatedness that being a person consists.

John Mbiti captures this relational principle of personhood with his now famous statement: "I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am" (Mbiti 1969: 108, 109, 117). The statement adequately captures the notion of the *ekstasis* of communion which makes the individual unique, indispensable, and irreplaceable as part of the active and open relational existence and experience that is the African community. So personhood is being-with, being-in-communion, or person-in-communion.

This relational notion of personhood is deeply marked by *becoming*. The being of a person is derived not only from relatedness, but also from intended becoming, its *telos*. The Kalabari person is believed to be continually growing toward an ideal so as to fully actualize their potentialities, to become all that they can be, to

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become the perfect, complete person (*krakra tombo*). This ideal is a synthetic one, which is reached by bringing what is culturally good, true, and beautiful into firm relation with the life of a person. This state of perfection has meaning only in its subsumption under the overarching concern of the preservation and promotion of the community's well-being.

It is clear from this understanding of personhood that the self is not individuated apart from or before communion. The community and the experience of communion contribute something significant to both the identity and the self-definition of the individual. Relationship and fellowship are constituent of identity and are fundamentally constitutive of personhood. There is a profound recognition that the being of personhood derives from interpersonal relations and that relations derive from being a person.

The Kalabari notion of personhood is deeply imbricated in its traditional ethical system. One of the important tasks of the system is to support and nudge the ecstatic movement of human beings toward one another and toward beyond-human nature and the divine realm. This nudging is not just about sustaining the relationality that frames personhood. There is a developmental aspect to both particularity (individual distinctiveness) and relations in the notion of personhood. In Kalabari, personhood can be developed only when an individual and their capabilities combine with the resources of a social world (relation) to create, sustain, or transform a society. The good of each person depends on relationship with others. Relationships with others enable individuals to mix their capabilities with social resources in order to develop and sustain their particularity so that their prospects in life are not diminished or harmed. The development and sustenance of their particularity through the nexus of relationships encompass two senses: negative and positive. In one sense, it means that their community should not diminish their possibilities and acceptable choices; in the other, it means that the community is not to deprive or withhold from them what is due to them (and that includes social contexts that they need to shape their particularity) and not to refuse to act to improve their situation in life so that they can contribute their best to the community's well-being.

The community in Kalabari is conceived as the proper place in which individuals can amalgamate their capabilities and capacities with the resources of the social world in order to develop their personhoods. A person's being could be more complete and more perfect in kind by giving and receiving inputs, qualities, and characteristics from the communal milieu. The paramount moral goal of the person is to contribute their best to the well-being of the community, and the community's aim is to let the individual be all that they can be, develop all their capabilities and capacities so that their personhood is not diminished or threatened but enhanced.

This notion of personhood (person always as person-in-communion) has tremendous influence on how African worlds were shaped. We shall now examine how personhood shaped the precolonial (traditional) community and then what

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has happened to this relationship in the postcolonial world, in the African worlds after the advents of colonialism and missionary Christianity. In traditional African society the promotion of the well-being of the community was basically about the protection and prolonging of life. Life was seen as the continual maintenance of the bond of communion (harmony) between all five segments of community (gods/spirits, community, family, persons, and nature) so that the vital force, the spiritual stuff that sustains all lives remains at its strongest in the community. The life of the community consisted in its relationships and sociality. Relationships make possible the preservation and continuation of the existence of the community. This focus on harmony did not obviate or diminish attention to the person. The person is the key to the set of the relationships that is the community's life and its paramount good. The person and community were so interwoven that one could not talk of the welfare of one without automatically implying the other. Not only were person-in-communion or being-togetherness the form the community took, but a person also could not exist without the community.

This notion of personhood that so shaped and structured the traditional world is fast changing. The cumulative effect of the weight of blackness suffered by Africans under colonialism and various attempts by the colonial state and colonial Christian mission to transform African personhood to fit the autonomous, self-interested individual have weakened the bond between individuals and their societies. In the 1970s Peter Ekeh wrote an insightful essay on the existence of two publics: the communal and the civic. In his thinking the communal or ethnic public is considered moral and beloved, while the other public is amoral, hostile, and largely hated. With the communal public, which recognizes the worth of their personhood and citizenship, the individual feels a sense of citizenship and membership in the community. The individual is morally linked to the society and sees their duties as moral obligations to benefit and sustain a community of which they are a member. The civic public, however, which was primarily imposed by colonialism with its apparatus of coercion, refuses to recognize the worth or citizenship of the individual, and has no moral link with the individual. The individual, steadily attacked by the colonial and postcolonial state, is alienated from the state and their attention is focused more on the primordial public, such as kin and ethnic groups, which are independent of the state. Unlike the attitude of cooperation in the primordial realm, the attitude toward the civic realm is purely materialistic and exploitative, and the individual experiences no moral urge to give back to the civic realm in return for its benefits. In fact, the individual is obliged to draw resources from the civic public for the benefit of the primordial community (Ekeh 1990, 1975).

In a sense this development of the two publics is a result of an imposition of an alien personhood that did not establish vital and sustainable linkages between personhood and community, which had existed in the traditional society. Some might argue that Africans in traditional societies were too narrowly bound to

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small territories for their notion of personhood to work in the expansive communities created by Christianity and colonialism. This assertion is not always correct. There are many ways to refute it, one of which is found in Paul Landau's work on colonial South Africa. Landau has demonstrated that colonial mission and the colonial state unduly privileged ethnicity as the primary way of understanding identity in Africa. Africans, he argues, were animated by a consciousness that went beyond tribes. The tribalization of identity was part of the governance and dominance mechanisms used to control Africans and to dampen mass political mobilization (Landau 2010).

In any case, today personhood and community have so drifted apart that the links between them, even at the communal or ethnic level, have largely broken down. In the violent and rapacious world of postcolonial Africa, individuals now pursue their well-being to the detriment of their communities. Indeed, in Africa individuals and the state have drifted apart and the apparatuses of state, which have refused to recognize individuals' worth or citizenship, have steadily attacked them. The terms of exchange between the state and the individual, between state and society, are ill defined and are often antagonistic. The individual, or rather personhood, is alienated from the state (society) and the individual's attention is focused more on the self and its life projects, to which communal relationships have become largely peripheral. The interests of individuals are increasingly set against their primordial communities. The elites now brazenly divert government funds meant for their communities, or even internally generated monies for community projects, into their personal coffers.

The "civilizing mission" and the articulation of Western personhood with indigenous African personhood have given rise to complex forms of personhood. The encounters between the colonial state and Christianity on the one hand and the traditional social ontology of personhood on the other have resulted in hybrid and strange forms of individual–community relations. This is the crisis of personhood in Africa in the wake of colonialism and Christianity, and it is one that is exacerbated by postindependence politics and some of the practices of the postmissionary African church.

The differences in moral practices that defined Ekeh's split publics have all but evaporated, engendering another kind of twoness. There are now the individual (private/social) sphere and the public sphere, which actually maps a tripartite ethical terrain: core, margin, and submargin. More accurately, we have a core–margin–submargin structure of personhood, which is a product of the conflation of the two ideals of African and Western personhood. The core consists of competitive, self-interested individualism. The margin is comprised of communal values, the remnants of the communal-relational personhood. The submargin is the associational values that connect individuals to cross-cutting institutions and collectives beyond the ethnic groups. The core–margin relation is not fixed but dynamic. For example, in social interactions communal orientation might move down into the submargin or rise up to the core position.

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Conclusion

The crucial impact of colonialism and Christianity on African personhood is a double one, "two unreconciled strivings." The effect of the transformation of African personhood is visible in the fundamental orientation of individuals to their communities. The connection has changed from an "I–thou" relation to an "I-it" relation. And the same forces that gave rise to this transformation have also enforced a psychological duality on many Africans, have split the "I" from within for individuals whose personhood is both African and not African. These are Africans that both do and do not belong to Africa (either communal or civic) and the West. There is now an other within the African self. But, in my view, the nature of African personhood in the future will not be determined by the opposition between the two forces but by their combination.

Notes

1 "Letter from Fiscal Denyssen to Sir John Cradock," March 16, 1813, RCC, 9, 154; CAR, Kaapse Plakkaatboek [1754], 3, 1–16, quoted in Vernal (2011: 12).
2 Lugard to Colonial Office, May 29, 1915, NAI, CSO 26/33/28160; see also Falola (2009: 31).
3 "Les deviors des missionaires dans notre colonie," *Avenir Colonial Belge* (October 30, 1921), quoted in Ayedze (2009: 199).
4 G3A3/1890/140, S. A. Crowther, "Difficulties on the Way of Missionary Work on the West Coast of Africa," August 1890 (emphasis original), quoted in W. Wariboko (1998: 11).
5 C. S. Sp. 191/A/5, MS, Biography of Father Lutz by Father Ebenrecht, fol. 35, quoted in Isichei (1995: 82).
6 For a general introduction to African philosophy relating to personhood, see Coetzee and Roux (1998: 149–185, 292–305, 317–336); Wiredu (2004: 324–342).
7 This discussion is drawn from Wariboko (2008).

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