

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND THE CONCEPT OF PERSONHOOD IN YORUBA CULTURE: EXPLORING THE FUTURE OF SOCIAL ROLES IN YORUBA SOCIETY

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Abstract

This paper examines the concept of personhood within the Yoruba cultural milieu and its philosophical implications for understanding artificial intelligence (AI). In Yoruba culture, personhood is a dynamic process, deeply tied to moral responsibility, social roles and communal participation, rather than merely being a function of rationality or individual autonomy. The paper observes that in Yoruba culture, personhood is not merely biological or an inherent status but encompasses a moral and social paradigm defined by one's roles, responsibilities and relationships within the community. This stands in contrast to Western philosophical paradigms, which often emphasize rationality, consciousness, or individual autonomy as the defining traits of personhood. As AI continues to evolve, increasingly simulating human autonomy and decision-making, questions about its probable status as a "person" arise. This paper adopts a critical method to query whether Yoruba cultural paradigms, which stress moral worth and communal relationships, can offer new insights into the evolving definition of personhood in the age of AI. The paper therefore concludes that the integration of AI into Yoruba society will require careful deliberation of how these AI technologies will either align with or disrupt their long established cultural standard and perspective on personhood.

Keywords: Yoruba Culture, AI, Personhood, Identity, Communal ethics.

Introduction

The increasing growth of artificial intelligence (AI) has generated extensive debate regarding the boundaries of personhood and identity, particularly when it comes to understanding what it means to be a "person" within a world gradually influenced by autonomous machines. While much of the debates around AI and personhood are centered on Western philosophical contexts, which emphasize cognitive abilities such as consciousness and rationality, non-Western perspectives offer valuable insights that can broaden our understanding of identity and personhood. One such perspective is found within Yoruba culture, where personhood goes beyond its biological association to involve a dynamic process shaped by moral conduct, social roles, and community participation (Akinyemi, 2010). In the Yoruba worldview, personhood is closely tied to an individual's moral standing within the community and their ability to fulfill social obligations. This contrasts with Western paradigms, which often root personhood in the intrinsic and natural features of the individual, such as self-awareness, autonomy, and rationality (Wheeler, 2008). For instance, according to John Locke's classical notion of personhood, it is one's rationality and consciousness that defines their status as a person (Locke, 1690/1975). Similarly, more recent AI debates, such as those by Bryson (2018), follow this line of thought by arguing that cognitive capacities should determine how we ethically treat AI. However, Yoruba notion

challenges this individualistic and cognitive-centered view of personhood by introducing a relational concept, where one's identity is affirmed through relationships with others and through adherence to social and moral codes (Gyekye, 1997). As Gyekye explains (Gyekye, 1997:106), "In the African view, to be is to belong to a community; and separation from the community represents a complete loss of identity for the individual." Consequently, in the Yoruba perspective, personhood is seen as something achieved through communal recognition and moral uprightness rather than innate capacities. The intersection of AI and Yoruba views of personhood raises thought-provoking philosophical questions on whether AI can ever achieve personhood if viewed through a Yoruba cultural lens, given that AI lacks social responsibility and moral agency or whether AI's growing autonomy in decision-making systems can challenge the community-based framework of personhood in Yoruba philosophy. According to Okere (2020), the increasing capability of AI to perform tasks once deemed exclusive to humans invites a rethinking of what it means to be a moral agent within a moral community. This paper, therefore, aims to explore how Yoruba cultural paradigms can provide a fresh perspective on the concept of personhood, particularly in the context of AI.

Personhood within the Yoruba Cultural Context

The concept of personhood is central to the Yoruba worldview, representing a dynamic and multidimensional understanding of what it means to be a person within a community. Unlike several Western philosophical frameworks that emphasize individualism, autonomy, and cognitive abilities such as consciousness and rationality, Yoruba notions of personhood are deeply rooted in moral responsibility, communal relationships, and social roles. In Yoruba thought, becoming a person, or *eniyàn*, is a *process* rather than an inherent biological state, with moral and social dimensions taking precedence over biological traits. Thus, central to Yoruba idea personhood is the notion of *Omoluabi*, a term used to describe a person of good character and moral integrity. *Omoluabi* is a model of ethical conduct that emphasizes virtues such as honesty, humility, respect, and responsibility (Gbadegesin, 1991). The concept suggests that to be recognized as a full person in Yoruba society, one must adhere to certain moral standards and behave in ways that promote harmony and well-being within the community. Akinyemi (2010:33) explains that "personhood in Yoruba thought is not simply about being biologically human; it is about fulfilling one's moral obligations and contributing to the collective good". The emphasis on moral responsibility means that personhood in Yoruba cultural thought is not automatically granted by birth. Rather, it is something that must be achieved and maintained through moral action and social engagement. Reflecting on this Abimbola (1975:78) says, "the Yoruba believe that to become a person, one must cultivate good character, and without this, one cannot fully participate in the community or be considered a complete human being." This understanding of personhood as a *process* supports the Aristotelian virtue ethics, where the development of good character and moral virtues is seen as central to the attainment of a good life (Aristotle, 1998).

In addition to moral responsibility, personhood in Yoruba belief is essentially tied to communal relations and the fulfillment of social roles within the community. The Yoruba worldview is strongly communal, with the individual seen as inseparable from the community in which they live. Mbiti (1969:108) famously stated, "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am." This African communalistic perspective contrasts with the Western notion of the autonomous, self-sufficient individual, emphasizing instead the interconnectedness of individuals within a social and moral framework. Thus, for the Yoruba,

personhood is conferred by the community. One becomes a person by fulfilling social obligations, participating in communal life, and contributing to the collective welfare. Gyekye (1997:55) notes that "in African thought, the individual is part and parcel of the community, and it is within this context that one's identity and personhood are fully realized." This communal approach highlights the idea that personhood is relational—individuals are defined by their relationships with others and their ability to engage in mutually beneficial interactions. In this sense, personhood is contingent upon active participation in social life. Those who fail to uphold their social responsibilities or violate communal norms may be seen as lacking in personhood, regardless of their inherent biological status. As Olajubu (2002:41) argues, "to be an individual in Yoruba society is to be enmeshed in a web of social obligations, and failure to honor these obligations can lead to a loss of personhood." This conditional nature of personhood suggests that individuals must continually earn their status as persons through their actions and relationships with others.

Artificial Intelligence and the Criteria of Personhood

As pointed out earlier, the advancement of artificial intelligence (AI) has sparked philosophical debates regarding whether AI entities can or should be considered persons or whether our moral community should be expanded to accommodate and recognize AI as persons. Fundamentally, personhood is understood through criteria such as consciousness, rationality, moral agency, and social participation. These criteria, historically applied to humans, are now being reconsidered in light of AI's increasing autonomy and cognitive abilities. Historically, consciousness and rationality have been central to Western philosophical conceptions of personhood. Both Immanuel Kant and John Locke argued respectively that personhood is tied to the possession of rationality, autonomy, consciousness and self-awareness, with memory playing a crucial role in personal identity. In Locke's view for instance, a person is "thinking, intelligent being that has reason and reflection" (Locke, 1975: 335). In Kant's view, "rational beings alone have the capacity to act according to the representation of laws that is according to principles, and thereby have a will. Since the derivation of actions from laws requires reason, the will is nothing other than practical reason." (Kant, 1785). This quotation underscores Kant's belief that rationality is central to personhood because it enables individuals to act autonomously, follow moral laws, and make decisions grounded in reason, distinguishing persons from other beings that lack this capacity. This emphasis on cognitive abilities continues to shape contemporary discussions of personhood, particularly when considering AI. However, while AI can exhibit forms of rationality, particularly in problem-solving or pattern recognition, it lacks consciousness, the subjective awareness that many consider central to human experience and personhood. According to Searle (1980), AI systems, no matter how advanced, are merely executing programs and cannot achieve consciousness and intentionality. Searle's Chinese Room argument contends that while AI can simulate understanding, it does not genuinely possess it, as it follows pre-programmed instructions without comprehension (Searle, 1980). From this perspective, AI's lack of consciousness fundamentally disqualifies it from being considered a person, despite its apparent cognitive abilities.

Another key criterion for personhood is moral agency, the ability to make ethical decisions and be held responsible for one's actions. Moral agency requires not only the capacity for rational thought but also an understanding of right and wrong, along with the ability to act on moral principles (Korsgaard, 1996). In this respect, AI still falls short. While AI can be programmed to follow ethical guidelines, it does not possess the moral awareness

or intentionality required to be considered a moral agent. AI's decisions are based on algorithms and data inputs rather than a moral framework that it can autonomously understand and engage with (Floridi & Sanders, 2004). In addition to moral agency, social participation and relationships with others are often seen as vital components of personhood. Philosophers like Gyekye (1997) and Wiredu (1992) emphasize that personhood, particularly in African thought, is relational and communal, emerging from an individual's participation in social life. For the Yoruba, personhood is not granted at birth but must be earned through moral responsibility and communal engagement (Gbadegesin, 1991). AI, while capable of interacting with humans, does not engage in the kinds of meaningful social relationships that are essential to this view of personhood. While AI exhibits some traits associated with personhood, such as rationality and problem-solving abilities, it lacks others that are essential, particularly consciousness, moral agency, and social participation. AI's capabilities are rooted in algorithms and data, which allow for sophisticated decision-making but do not equate to the subjective experience or moral responsibility that defines personhood in both Western and non-Western philosophical traditions (Bryson, 2018; Okere, 2020). From these perspectives, AI, though advanced, cannot fulfill the full criteria for personhood.

AI, Personhood and the Future of Social Roles in Yoruba Society

The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into modern Yoruba society raises fundamental questions about how emerging technologies could redefine traditional roles, particularly in cultures with deeply entrenched social values. In Yoruba society as noted earlier, personhood is not an inherent status conferred by birth but rather a dynamic communal process shaped by moral responsibility and social participation (Gyekye, 1997). As AI technologies advance and take on roles traditionally held by humans, such as caregiving, teaching and decision-making, the implications for personhood and social roles in Yoruba society are profound. In this context, AI's potential to assume certain human roles raises philosophical questions. While AI can be programmed to perform tasks with efficiency and even mimic certain human interactions, it still lacks the moral agency and communal participation that are critical to personhood in Yoruba culture. As Okere (2020:91) explains, "AI may enhance social functions, but it cannot engage in the kinds of moral decisions or social relationships that define a true person in Yoruba thought." Therefore, AI may not be recognized as a person in the Yoruba sense, since it does not embody the moral and social dimensions required for personhood.

Regardless of AI's inability to meet Yoruba criteria for personhood, its increasing role in society may still significantly impact traditional social structures. In Yoruba society, roles such as caregiving, education and leadership are deeply rooted in communal values, often requiring moral judgment and interpersonal relationships (Olajubu, 2002). The idea of AI taking on these roles challenges the traditional view that human interactions are essential for maintaining the moral and social fabric of the community. For instance, AI systems in healthcare or caregiving roles might provide valuable services to individuals, but they also lack the emotional responsiveness and moral engagement that is typically expected of caregivers. The caregiver's role is not just to provide physical care but also to nurture relationships, display empathy and act with moral consideration qualities that AI, as it currently exists, cannot authentically replicate (Bryson, 2018). As these AI technologies become more incorporated into such roles, there may be a shift in societal expectations about what it means to fulfill these duties, potentially diminishing the importance of moral

agency in these roles. In the same way, AI in education for instance may alter the role of teachers and mentors in Yoruba society. Traditionally as understood, teachers and elders play critical roles in transmitting not just knowledge but also values and cultural norms to the younger generation. The introduction of AI as a learning tool may further raise the question of whether it can accomplish these social roles efficiently. According to Gyekye (1997:61), "education in African cultures is not only about intellectual development but also about moral and social formation." AI, nonetheless, lacks the capacity to instill moral values or engage pupils in the kind of meaningful social relationships that are vital to Yoruba educational structure.

As these AI technologies continue to advance and take on more prominent roles in society, Yoruba culture may either face challenges in maintaining its traditional ideas of personhood and social roles or fail to integrate these technologies into their structure. While AI can undeniably enhance efficiency and productivity in certain domains, its limitations in moral agency and communal engagement mean that it cannot substitute the deeply relational and moral aspects of these roles in Yoruba society. Moreover, the increased reliance on AI may also lead to an alteration in how these roles are perceived and valued. For instance, if caregiving, education and other essential roles become more automated, there is a risk that the moral and social dimensions of these tasks may be de-emphasized, leading to a more functional, less relational understanding of these roles. This shift could erode the communal bonds that are central to Yoruba identity and the concept of personhood in general.

Summary and Conclusion

The Yoruba concept of personhood highlights moral responsibility, communal relationships and the fulfillment of social roles. Unlike Western notions of personhood, which often center on individual autonomy and cognitive abilities, Yoruba thought system views personhood as a process that is achieved through moral action and social engagement. This dynamic and relational approach to personhood offers a valuable perspective for understanding identity in both traditional and contemporary contexts, including debates on AI. By critically looking at the Yoruba concept of personhood, we gain a deeper appreciation of the cultural dimensions of what it means to be a person and how these ideas can inform broader philosophical discussions on identity and morality from this cultural viewpoint.

AI, in spite of its growing autonomy and cognitive capabilities, does not meet the traditional criteria for personhood, particularly in terms of consciousness, moral agency and social participation as impressively reflected in Yoruba cultural milieu. While it can perform tasks that resemble rational thought, AI lacks the subjective awareness and moral responsibility that are central to being a person. As AI technology continues to advance, the philosophical and ethical questions surrounding its status will become increasingly relevant, challenging both Western and non-Western conceptions of personhood. In Yoruba society, personhood and social roles are deeply intertwined with moral responsibility and communal participation. AI, although capable of performing some tasks traditionally associated with human roles, lacks the moral agency and social engagement necessary for personhood in the Yoruba logic. As AI takes on greater responsibilities, the challenge will be to balance technological advancement with the preservation of the moral and communal values that define social roles in Yoruba culture. Eventually, the integration of AI into Yoruba society will require careful consideration of how these technologies will align with or disrupt their long-standing cultural norms.

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