

## INTERROGATING THE CONCEPT OF IDENTITY AND THE MARKER FOR AFRICAN IDENTITY

**Evaristus Emeka Isife**

Department of Philosophy,  
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka,  
Anambra State, Nigeria.

[emekaisife@gmail.com](mailto:emekaisife@gmail.com); [ee.isife@stu.unizik.edu.ng](mailto:ee.isife@stu.unizik.edu.ng)

&

**Arinze Agbanusi, PhD**

Associate Professor of Philosophy,  
Department of Philosophy,  
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka,  
Anambra State, Nigeria.

[ac.agbanusi@unizik.edu.ng](mailto:ac.agbanusi@unizik.edu.ng)

DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.33912.11529

### **Abstract**

*Identity is that part of an individual's self which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups), together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership. Philosophically, identity is from the Latin word *identitas* meaning sameness. Leibniz gives a modern formulation of the concept of identity as the relation each thing bears only to itself and it concerns a relation, specifically, a relation that  $x$  and  $y$  stand in if, and only if they are one and the same thing or identical to each other (that is, if, and only if  $x=y$ ). Locke speaks of personal identity and survival of consciousness following this understanding. The criterion for identity specifies, insofar as that is possible, the necessary and sufficient conditions for the survival of a thing. Humans are confronted with questions on identity in a world where flexibility is seen as a virtue and accelerating change pervades society. Again, "identity" is a predicate, which functions as an identifier, that is, a marker that distinguishes and differentiates one object from another object. Thus, identity in this sense focuses on the uniqueness of the concerned object. This paper critically analyzes the concept of identity within the framework of making sense of what can be called the marker for African Identity along the lines of communalism.*

**Keywords:** Identity, Sameness, African, Ubuntu, Preservation, Subsisting, Communalism

## Introduction

Vignoles (2017:1) asserts that the term identity refers to “how people answer the question, “who are you?” The question may be posed explicitly or implicitly, at a personal or a collective level, to others or to one self.” Identity is inescapable, both personal and social, in their content and in the processes by which they are formed, maintained and changed overtime. The personal and social nature of identity therefore gives the construct its greatest theoretical potential namely to provide insight into the relationship between the individual and society. This is where the individual self is being constructed from the milieu or the culture of the age. This also emphasizes the symbiotic relationship that exists between the individual, society and all it represents.

Oyserman *et al* maintain that the self, self-concept and identity are pointers to a certain consciousness that are “the traits, characteristics, social relations, roles and social group memberships that define who one is” ( 2012: 69). Identity can be focused on the past, (what used to be true of one), the present, (what used to be true of one now), or the future, (the person one expects or wishes to become). Identity therefore has something to do with becoming as that has a bearing with the concept of “being.” Identity is orienting as it provide a meaning-making lens and focus one’s attention on some but not other features of immediate context. Hence, identity together make up one’s self concept variously described as what comes to mind when one thinks of oneself or a thing.

If we focus on this aspect, identity is questioned as a structure or form of an individual’s self-relation and self-conception. Identity in this sense aims at competences and capacities of the individual to communicate, to interact, and to integrate and synthesize different emotional states, social roles, values, beliefs, group identifications and so on and these cannot be denied of Africans. Identity in the sense of self-sameness is not a fixed result of a process of development, but a dynamic process of continual integration itself, creating continuity in the persistent self-consciousness over space and time. This point also squares up with Isife’s position that: “culture is the internal equilibrium of a people’s personhood which derives from their once stable and communally appreciated cultural values” (2021: 64-65). It is in the light of this that this paper attempts to examine the concept of identity in order to be able to situate Africa within an identity framework that gives it its uniqueness as a people.

## Understanding Identity

Kehily (2009: 1) opines that a generally held assumption of late modernity suggests that “identity matters more now because we have more choices.” It could be argued that in previous generations, we had identity waiting for us. Thus, the existence of strong class-based and regionally specific communities shaped the life trajectories of individuals. Within these locally bounded contexts, individuals further developed a notion of being in the world through occupational structures and work-based cultures. Kehily made reference to a different conceptualization of identity in late modernity thus:

Everyone has to ask himself the question “who am I,” how should I live,” “who do I want to become,” and at the end of the day, be prepared to accept responsibility for the answer. In this sense freedom is for the modern individual, the fate he cannot escape, except by retreating into the fantasy world or through mental disorders. Freedom is therefore a mixed blessing. One needs it to be oneself; yet being oneself solely on the strength of other’s free choice means a life full of doubts and fears of error...self-construction of the self is, so to speak a necessity. Self-confirmation of the self is an impossibility (2009: 2).

Since the self cannot confirm itself, the community becomes another important variable in the confirmation of the individual self. This position repudiates “post-truth” and makes the case that the community has a role to play in the objectivity of truth amidst freedom of the individual.

Identity for the West is not the fixed markers people assume them to be but are instead dynamically constructed in the moment. Choices that feel identity-congruent in one situation may not necessary feel identity-congruent in another situation. For example, one can have a religious identity that contains relevant content and goals, such as what to do, what to value, and how to believe. Personal identity is however contrasted within social identity (Kehily, 2009). Social identity involves the knowledge that one is a member of a group, one’s feelings about group membership, and knowledge of a group’s rank or status compared to other groups.

Identity then is a distinct part of self-concept, the internalized meanings and expectations associated with the position one holds in social networks and the role one plays. Identity is no doubt an ambiguous and slippery term (Burkingham, 2008) and the fundamental paradox of identity is inherent in the term itself. From the latin root *Idem*, meaning “the same” the term nevertheless implies both similarity and difference. On the one hand, identity is something unique to each of us that we assume to be more or less consistent (and hence the same) over time. In these formulations, our identity is something we uniquely possess: it is what distinguishes us from other people. Yet on the other hand, identity also implies a relationship with a broader collective or social group of some kind. When we talk about national identity, cultural identity, or gender identity, for example, we imply that our identity is partly a matter of what we share with other people.

In this sense, identity is about identification with others whom we assume are similar to us (if not exactly the same), at least in some significant ways. Much of the debate around identity derives from the tensions between these two aspects. On one level, I am the product of my unique personal biography, yet who I am (or who I think I am) varies according to who I am with, in the social situations in which I find myself.

Allusion is made to Michael Foucault who argue that “who we are or who we perceive ourselves to be is far from a matter of individual choice; on the contrary, it is the product of powerful and subtle forms of ‘governmentality’ that are characteristics of modern liberal democracies” (Burkingham,2008: 10). Foucault asserts that there has been a shift in the ways in which power is exercised in the modern world, which is apparent in a whole range of social domains. Power is now diffused through social relationships so that even the individual behavior must conform to acceptable societal norms. This clearly shows that the individual identity is shaped by the society while social identity is also a true reflection of the individual.

Identity is a concept that neither imprisons (as does much in sociology) nor detaches (as does much in philosophy and psychology) persons from their social and symbolic universes, so it “has over the years retained a generic force that few concepts have” (Howard,2000: 367). Again, identity is never *a priori*, nor a finished product; it is only ever the problematic process of access to an image of totality. At earlier historical moments, identity was not so much an issue; when societies were more stable, identity was to a great extent, assigned rather than selected or adopted as was obtainable in pre-colonial Africa.

The concept of identity as it is known currently carries the full weight of the need for a sense of who one is, together with an often overwhelming pace of change in surrounding social contexts, that is, changes in the groups and networks in which people and their identities are embedded and in the societal structures and practices in which those networks are themselves embedded. Social identity theory for example, “focuses on the extent to which individuals identify themselves in terms of group memberships” (Howard, 2000: 386). The central tenet of social identity theory is that individuals define their identities along two dimensions: social, defined by membership in various social groups; and personal, the idiosyncratic attributes that distinguish an individual from others.

Social and personal identity is thought to lie at opposite ends of a continuum, becoming more or less salient depending on the context, though not easily separable. Because people are motivated to evaluate themselves positively, they tend to evaluate positively those groups to which they belong and to discriminate against groups they perceive to pose a threat to their social identity. This point may be seemingly responsible for colonization as the West might have this mindset of the superiority of their identity making them move to civilize the people of Africa considered to be primitive and savages.

### **African Identity**

All human behavior depends upon a system of principles and for the Bantu African for example, it is very possible, both with the individual and with the tribal or culture group, that the mysteries of life and death, survival and destruction, together with fear arising from all these mysteries became the psychological agent that gave birth to certain behavioral patterns that gives them their identity and to certain redemptive practices. Tempels (1959:17) captures this point thus:

If one has not penetrated into the depths of the personality as such, if one does not know on what basis their acts come about, it is not possible to understand the Bantu. One is entering into no spiritual contact with them. One cannot make oneself intelligible to them, especially in dealing with the great spiritual realities. On the contrary, one runs the risk, while believing that one is “civilizing” the individual, of in fact corrupting him, working to increase the numbers of the deracinated and to become the architect of revolts.

The point being made above is that the Bantu have an identity that each individual share with the general outlook of the society. Certain words are constantly being used by Africans which express their supreme values. These supreme values include: "life, force, to live strongly, or vital force" (Tempels, 1959: 30). Used negatively, the same idea is expressed when the Bantu say: we act thus to be protected from misfortune, or from a diminution of life or of being, or in order to protect ourselves from those influences which annihilate or diminish us. Force, the potent life, vital energy is the object of prayers and invocations to God, to the spirits and to the dead, as well as of all that is usually called magic, sorcery, or magical remedies. Again, Tempels articulates the point thus:

The Bantu will tell you that they go to a diviner to learn the words of life, so that he can teach them the way of making life stronger. In every Bantu language, it is easy to recognize the words or phrases denoting a force, which is not used in an exclusively bodily sense, but in the sense of the integrity of our whole being (1959:31).

The cultural worldview of the Bantu Africa is where its identity is irked out and this is predicated on the notion of vital force upon which everything about the Bantu African makes sense such as ontology, language, ethics, psychology and even politics. This goes to show that, the identity of a people or individual is colored by their most cherished beliefs to which their lives revolve around.

Again, African identity can be found in religion and philosophy as averred by John S. Mbiti when he insists that traditional concepts still form the essential background of many African peoples, though obviously this differs from individual to individual and from place to place. Mbiti asserts that:

Africans are notoriously religious, and each people have its own religious system with a set of beliefs and practices. Religion permeates into all the departments of life so fully that it is not easy or possible always to isolate it. A study of these religious systems is, therefore, ultimately a study of the peoples themselves in all the complexities of both traditional and modern life. To ignore these traditional beliefs, attitudes and practices can only lead to a lack of understanding of African behavior and problems (1969:1).

Though the philosophical systems of different African people have not yet been formulated into one corpus, they can be found in religion, proverbs, oral traditions, ethics and morals of the society concerned. African philosophy can therefore be referred to as “the understanding, attitude of mind, logic and perception behind the manner in which African people think, act or speak in different situations of life” (Mbiti,1969: 2). Some of the things that give the African his identity are: language, geography, culture, social and political organization, religious beliefs subsumed under the broad framework of communalism. This probably explains the fact of fundamental beliefs being found over wide stretches of Africa. These are the main features of an African tribe, people, society or nation. A person has to be born a member of it and he or she cannot change tribal membership. Tribal identity is still a powerful force even in modern African statehood.

From Mbiti’s submission, identity in African worldview has a very strong affinity with totem as the totem is the visible symbol of unity, of kinship, of belongingness, of togetherness and common affinity. In traditional life then, “the individual does not and cannot exist alone except corporately” (Mbiti,1969: 108). He or she owes his or her existence to other people, including those of past generations and his or her contemporaries. He or she is simply part of the whole. The community must therefore, make, create or produce the individual, for the individual depends on the corporate group.

This idea of the individual being a creation of the community is widespread in Africa and it is also called *Ubuntu* in some quarters. Bolden (2014:1) avers that the concept of *Ubuntu* “is an alternative to individualistic and utilitarian philosophies that tend to dominate the West.” It is a Zulu/Xhosa word with parallels in many other African languages, which is most directly translated into English as “humanness”. The origin of *Ubuntu* as a concept can be traced to the Bantu people of Southern Africa although the philosophy is now shared across much of the continent. It is perhaps best understood as a social philosophy based on principles of care and community, harmony and human existence.

*Ubuntu* is a relational philosophy (Bolden,2014: 2). Its frequent articulation as “I am because we are” points towards a strongly constructivist ontology in which a people’s sense of being cannot be detached from the social context in which they find themselves. It highlights the importance of a subjective and emotional appreciation of human experience rather than privileging objectivity and rationality. *Ubuntu* is also collectivist in orientation. Bolden asserts that:

Ubuntu expresses the value of collaboration, cooperation and community. It espouses an ethics of care and respect for others and the importance of solidarity in the face of adversity. It is perhaps unsurprising that such an approval has prevailed in a continent that has experienced so much social, political, environmental and economic upheaval, where collective action and mutual assistance have been essential to survival (2014:3).

The concept of *Ubuntu* is also inter-subjective in that it focuses on the relationship between the individual and the collective, rather than privileging one over the other. The concept gives a clear insight into the identity of Africans founded on communality. An individual is an individual in the community and the community is a community because of the individual. This defines the African identity and makes it such that it is easier to delineate.

In the principle of *Ubuntu*, values such as: sympathy, compassion, benevolence, solidarity, hospitality, generosity, sharing, openness, affirming, availability, kindness, caring, harmony, interdependence, obedience, collectivity, and consensus are derivable. Ubuntu is “opposite to vengeance, confrontation, retribution; and values life, dignity, compassion, humaneness, harmony and reconciliation” (Mugumbate and Nyanguru,2013: 85).

### **The Western Distortion of African Identity**

The issue of African identity is unarguably, the central plank of contemporary African philosophy due mainly to historical and contextual reasons. Oguejiofor and Ezenwa-Ohaeto (2015) argue that, given the pivotal importance of language in ensuring cultural identity, there is an antithesis between the quest for identity and the neglect of African languages. Contemporary African philosophy suggests that African philosophy is historical and thus rejecting the claims of certain scholars who think otherwise. Oguejiofor and Ezenwa-Ohaeto (2015:3) aver that:

The issue of identity itself and how it became the central issue in contemporary African philosophy is itself very historical. For Wiredu, the question of African Identity is not an attempt to apply the metaphysical laws of identity and excluded

middle. It is not whether Africans are Africans. It is rather a normative question, whether Africans are what they should be.

The question raises a negative feeling, for people do not usually spend much time in asking what they should be as a people, a country or a continent. This negativity is created by the historical experience of the African with the West, starting from the time of slavery. By the time the process of capturing and enslaving Africans was started, Europe, through its contacts with the rest of the world, has cultivated cultural triumphalism with the implication of utter denigration for other cultures and people of the world (Oguejiofor and Ezenwa-Ohaeto, 2015).

Thus, colonialism occluded Western self-interest and progressed with complete denigration of all that was African. To justify colonialism and cultural subjugation, Africa was presented as a continent without history, without geography, literature, culture, civilization and of course, philosophy. Clearly, the intention and execution of the West towards Africa was to rob it of its identity so that it will embrace the identity of his slave master over time. These traits can be found even among contemporary African philosophers who can be tagged "Professional Philosophers." It is imperative therefore for unity of purpose to be advanced so that contemporary African scholars will keep in touch with their historical roots and be able to take back their battered identity as bastardized by the Westerners.

Ndubuisi (2013:222) bemoans the fact that "racialism, slave trade and colonization gave rise to African cultural alienation which also gave rise to the loss of identity and no meaningful development." African philosophers and the philosophical paradigms are not set out to create a complete new African but rather seek to know, understand, clarify, articulate and synthesize the African experience as African philosophy bears on African identity.

The question of African identity bears on the principle of being that "what is, is and what is not, is not." Africans naturally are same as their culture and worldview. While human nature and dignity is universal and common to humans, each human person is also a particular mix of the entire element which goes into its making. This particular mix accordingly determines his or her individual personality, that is, his or her character, temperament and individuality. Although a person is traditional and free but these typical human characteristics combine with other physiological aspects of being or of human being to create an identity.

African identity bears on the stuff of which any African can be identified and associated with appropriately and comfortably. It bears also, on that underlying element of unity in the plurality of all African peoples. African identity “does not subsist on the accidental facts, may be, by the virtue that one was born and bred or lives in the African continent. Identity is therefore both physical and transcendental” (Ndubuisi, 2013: 224). The facts then remain that the pathological distortion of the mind and the devastating effects of racialism, slave trade and colonization can actually affect a people’s identity.

While globalization has brought immense benefits to Africa on the one hand, Africa’s entrance into and participation in the global scene has also precipitated a crisis of confusion and identity for Africa, a situation which is analogous to the effect of her encounter with colonialism so that “unless the dialectic of identity and difference that inevitably arises from this situation is constructively managed, it will be difficult for Africa to make the best of the opportunities inherent in globalization” (Ilodigwe, 2018: 794).

### **African Identity and the Contemporary World**

Kanu agrees that the quest for identity embodies the value of the first principle of being, which is that every being is determined in itself, is one with itself and is consistent with itself. He quoted Locke thus:

When we see anything to be in any place in any instant of time, we are sure that it is that very thing, and not another which at that same time exists in another place, how like and undistinguishable so ever it may be in all other respects: and in this consists identity, when the ideas it is attributed vary not at all from what they were that moment wherein we consider their former existence, and to which we compare the present...when thereafter we demand whether anything be the same or not, it refers always to something that existed such a time, in such a place, which it was certain, at that instant, was the same with itself, and no other (Kanu, 2013:34).

From Locke’s thoughts on identity, it becomes easier to delineate African identity as battered on the historical threshold of ideological race classification, slave trade and the dehumanization of Africa as well as colonialism and the exploitation of

Africa. Arising from these, African identity can be given just any kind of interpretation from: Africa's geo-numerical based identity, to Africa's black civilization-based identity, Africa's black backward-based identity, Africa's colour-based identity, Africa's pragmatic and recuperated based identity. However, there is an aspect of Africa's identity that seems to be traditional and central without evolution. Kanu asserts that:

Africa's community based identity was developed by Julius Nyerere in his *Ujamaa* socialism. Ujamaa is a Swahili word which means familyhood....the root of Africa socialism is the idea of familyhood, which extends beyond the basic family unit, the tribe, the community and the nation to include the entire humanity. It reveals the life of the traditional African people where a sense of brotherhood is very strong, and the society is so organized that it cares about its individuals (2013:39).

Although the slave trade, racism and colonialism affected the identity of Africans and were at the base of the initial quest for an African identity, "contemporary threat to Africa's identity is the issue of globalization" (Kanu, 2013: 40). This suggests that Africa's identity is constantly being threatened by forces that tend to jeopardize or reform it. Globalization can then be construed to being a blessing in disguise on the one hand, and a major obstacle on the other hand to the realization of Africa's true and authentic identity.

The African is not determined by the colour of his skin, nor the experiences of colonialism, slavery or underdevelopment. Rather, he is one "who embodies the cultural heritage of African and at the same time feels the need to change the African environment, not in isolation, but to meet with the challenges of global development" (Afi, 2008: 89). The crisis of African identity has overwhelmingly been traced to the advent of colonialism in Africa. The imposition of foreign cultural heritage on the people of Africa made them to begin to lose track of their cultural identity. This is alongside the influence of Islamic/Arabic cultural heritage which persisted long after colonialism is over. Afi avers further:

In fact the African today does not know what it is like to be a pure unadulterated Africa. Even though the African today acts, speaks, behaves either like a European, an American or an Arab, he is however neither considered nor accepted as an European or an Arab. Similarly, he is also not an African; may

be only by the colour of his skin, but culturally not one (2008:91).

The African, as it were today, has become a hybrid of some sort full of an identity problem. The reason for this is because of the exposure to different cultures through contacts, slave trade and colonialism. Africa had a strong and organized socio-political structure in pre-colonial days. The white colonialists saw the black people as being obviously inferior and not capable of abstract reasoning. The colonialists tried to convince the world that blacks are not capable of reasoning which is needed in order to help fashion out what is better for them. With this at the back of their minds, the white embarked on the duty of social and political restructuring of the black long cherished traditional institutions.

At the end of the restructuring, the Africans were given institutions that were very strange and foreign. The political structure was changed, social values were altered or completely changed and “a complete dislocation was introduced which ultimately led to an identity crisis and projected it to a height which was never to come down” (Fanon, 2008: 2). The African identity crisis also rubs off on the religion and the entire culture of the African people. The dearth of values in Africa today can be traceable to the inverse of culture and religion brought about by colonialism. Despite the fact that the African is a human being who lives in a society with others and is aware of the social and natural events in the world, the colonialists did not see them in a light other than “primitives” and “savages.”

Fanon asserts that man is a yes that vibrates to cosmic harmonies. The colonized, who have been uprooted, pursued, baffled and doomed to watch the dissolution of the truths that he or she had worked out for himself or herself one after another, had to give up projecting onto the world an antinomy that coexists with him or her. The black is a black man as a result of a series of aberrations of cosmic effect; he is rooted at the core of a universe from which he must be extricated. Fanon proposes nothing but “the liberation of the man of colour from himself” (2008:2). Fanon opines that:

The black man has two dimensions. One with his fellows, the other with the white man. A Negro behaves differently with a white man and with another Negro. That this self-division is a direct result of colonialist subjugation is beyond question...No one would dream of doubting that its major artery is fed from the heart of those various theories that have tried to prove that

the Negro is a stage in the slow evolution of monkey into man (2008:8).

Colonialism leaves the black man with the mentality that the white is indeed superior to the blacks. Hence, the blacks tries to find this false identity from the dictates and approval of the whites and this in turn leaves him with a different attitude and disposition towards his fellow blacks in terms of relationship. Every colonized people, in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation, that is, with the culture of the mother country and this trend continues even up to this contemporary time. The colonized says Fanon, "is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards. He becomes whiter as he renounces his blackness, his jungle" (Fanon,2008: 9).

### **Evaluation**

African thinking is very important to the reclaiming of Africa's identity hence, perhaps the surest way of getting Africa back is to get African thinking back to Africa. But even if we cannot return African thinking to Africa in geographical terms, "we could do so at least epistemically and paradigmatically" (Kwasi, 2019:33). The study of Africa has been and continues to be driven by paradigms and theories established by non-African scholars. The study of Africa means an African centered approach that conceptualizes reality and situates Africans within their cosmological, symbolic and pragmatic universe. Such an unambiguous approach not only affirms African agency and serves their best interests, but also authenticates the notion of an African cultural-historical continuum that predates African thinking and would continue even if the academic field ceased to exist.

This point is very important to the proper historical teaching of the African culture both to Africans and to the non-Africans clearing off any doubts and misinformation and in the process, engendering African true identity. The development and expansion of the African and its cultural and societal order is intimately linked to the notion of Africana studies, rather than African studies. In this context, it is important to note that "Africa should be viewed as a geographic, cultural, conceptual, socio-political, and spiritual entity" (Kwasi,2019: 35). In fact, the concept of culture that would suffice is one in which Africa is the expression of culture, that is, the physical (land and people), ideational (philosophy and thought), and spiritual (temporal manifestation).

In essence, Africa and its indigenous peoples are living entities bound in symbiotic relationship. And by extension, it only follows that the African who is situated within his/her conceptual universe and is culturally oriented to proclaim and express the pragmatism and philosophy of this universe without ambiguity is Africa. From the above, it is not in doubt that there will be several debates about what defines African identity leading to several theorizing. One notion of African identity is based on the credo that generally champions the view that the so called Africans should not only celebrate an identity that is predicated on racialised and essentialized blackness, but also seek out (and hopefully render assistance to) any black persons anywhere in the world. Crucially, it was “the black experience of slavery, as well as colonialism that helped to foster such essentialized notions of identity” (Kalua,2017: 24).

It is a matter of tragic irony that the very people who were written out of history are architects of some of the continent’s worst excesses, notably ethnic wars, genocides, and related manifestations of black-on-black hatred and violence. It is common knowledge that brothers have misunderstanding and disagreement, but Africans seems to have taken theirs to an unprecedented height with the animosity and wars it has executed amongst its kits and kin. The “otherness” or “communalism” is the bedrock upon which African identity is grounded. There is need therefore for Africans to unite to overcome their common problems. Tolerance is required for difference from an intercultural perspective especially in the twenty-first century with its many cases of conflicts arising from lack of tolerance.

Notions of identity which gesture towards totality or categorical imperatives in favour of the idea of identity as a provisional and mobile way of living out cultural identities which are social constructs ought to be rejected. This is because the African continent is grappling with humanitarian related challenges and the solution will be found in the degree to which the subjective development of the self is submerged in an African sense of collective identity. Africa must focus on the growth of freedom and responsibility which is the mark of true personhood since lack of individuation is at the root of the African crisis in identity and in the failure of the continent to sufficiently address its problems.

Kochalumchuvattil (2010:108) thinks that communalism in African society is “the main barrier to the process of subjective becoming.” Although this statement is contestable in the present circumstance. Tempels pointed out that Bantu psychology cannot conceive of man as an individual, as a force existing by itself and apart from its ontological relationship with other living beings. This

communalism is actually what distinguishes the African from the European and is the basis of African identity. The ontological primacy of the community and the organic character of the relations between individual persons even beyond physical death both points to the “all-importance of the community in enabling the individual to achieve well-being and realize selfhood” (Tempels,1959: 113).

Furthermore, Gyekye’s states that moderate communalism is where individuality, autonomy and responsibility are to some extent respected and catered for in the African communalistic understanding and are rarely exercised owing to the authoritarian hierarchical structure and deep respect for tradition found within the African culture. Such reflection on the status of African communalism in itself is not without some merit as philosophy as a discipline can also reflect on itself; some kind of meta-philosophy and in this case, meta-communalism. However, this reflection will only reinforce the truth that the individual self can be anything it wants to become on the wings of communalism because communalism provides the enabling environment for the individual to succeed since the individual is, because of the other. Subjectivity therefore cannot be the solution for the crisis of identity in Africa. In fact, subjectivity is part of the problem of the African because of the selfish tendency of the self.

### **Conclusion**

Marovah theorized “against an essentialized approach to identities in a ‘global context’ ” ( 2015:42). He explores and builds on arguments for plural identities, mobilizing concepts of heterogeneity and plurality, agency, and public deliberation from the capability approach for the purpose of advancing a way of understanding and negotiating identities that allows for a reasoned, flexible and inclusive approach. It is not difficult to see that he is concerned about a global interaction between Africa and itself and Africa and other continents. But most importantly, he is concerned about creating freedoms, opportunities and choices available for individuals to deliberate on the type of identities or African identity that they value on the assumption that identity is an object of reasoned choice from available alternatives.

It is erroneous to think that African identity is dynamic and heterogeneous rather than rigid and monolithic. Although there may be some enduring qualities which can be found in what constitutes African identity, it will vary depending on context. African identity should be understood as any distinction or department reasonably claimed to be African by the bearer(s) without shutting out other possibilities. Thus Marovah (2015) outlines the main components of African identity to include: essential identities (having to do with categorization of

individuals), Pan-African approached identities (Africa is for Africans), plural identities (this contrast the first two). Plural identity is complex and multi-layered. Marovah argues that there is a danger in viewing African identity as narrow and monolithic claiming that doing so will be borrowing from a colonial understanding of Africa. This is to say that one should not make the same mistake as the colonialist who defines Africa but from a wrong and faulty narrative. This is why Marovah will prefer to use the plural identities to refer to Africa. This position can be understood because Africa is known to be heterogeneous cluster of people with different tribe and tongue. But the whole can be given a meaning by the part and *vice versa*. To talk about African identity would not be wrong as there are some vital logical connectives that give the whole of Africa its defining identity.

Consequently, the marker or place holder for African identity is to be found in its cultural worldview as exemplified by communalism. That is the melting pot of all that the African was or is, or would be. The concept of identity can be understood in multiple ways arising from the culture and worldview that one is coming from. But as far as African identity is concerned, there can be no better way of putting it as did Isife when he states "Whether called *Ubuntu* or 'communalism', the main idea surrounding African identity is one of community or familyhood. What this means is that, the individual person finds his essence or identity from the community and not from himself" (2021:54).

## References

- Afisi, O.T.(2008). "Rethinking the African Identity Crisis" in *Nnamdi Azikiwe Journal of Philosophy* 1,(2), 89 - 108.
- Bolden, R.(2014). *Encyclopedia of Action Research*, edited by David Coghlan and Mary Brydon-Miller, London: Sage Publications.
- Buckingham, D. (2008). "Introducing Identity" in *Youth Identity and Digital Media*, edited by David Buckingham. John D, and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Series on Digital Media and Learning, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1- 24.
- Fanon, F.(2008). *Black Skin, White Mask*, trans. Charles Law Markmann, London: Pluto Press.
- Howard, J. A. (2000). "Social Psychology of Identities," in *Annual Review of Sociology* 26,367 - 393.

- Ilodigwe, D.(2018). "Globalization and the Question of African Identity," in *Sociology and Anthropology* 6 (10), 794 - 812.
- Isife, E. E. (2021). "Human Identity Crisis and Unsustainable Development in Africa: A Critical Study" in *Oracle of Wisdom Journal of Philosophy* 5 (2), 64 - 73.
- ..... "A Critical Analysis of the Implications of Covid 19 Pandemic on African Identity" in *Sapientia: Journal of Philosophy* 14, 54 - 64.
- Kalua, F. (2017). "Intermediality: A Paradigm for African Identity in the Twenty-First Century," in *Journal of Literary Studies* 33(1), 24 - 41.
- Kanu, I. A. (2013). "African Identity and the Emergence of Globalization," in *American International Journal of Contemporary Research* 3 (6), 34 - 42.
- Kanu, I. A. (2012). "The Africanity and Philosophicality of African Philosophy". *Internet Afrev: An International Online Multi-disciplinary Journal*. 2012. Vol.1. No.2, pp. 52-55.
- Kehily, M. J.(2009). "What is Identity? A Sociological Perspective" in *ESRC Seminar Series: The Educational and Social Impact of new Technologies on Young People in Britain, UK: London School of Economics*.
- Kochalumchuvattil, T. (2010). "The crisis of identity in Africa: A call for Subjectivity," in *Kritike* 4(1), 108 - 122.
- Konadu, K. (2019). "The Cultural Identity of Africa and the Global Tasks of Africana Studies," in *African Studies Quarterly* 7 (4),33- 40.
- Marovah, T. (2015). "Using the Capacity Approach to Conceptualize African Identity(ies)," in *Phronnimon* 16 ( 3), 42 - 57.
- Mbiti, J. (1969). *African Religions and Philosophy*, Nairobi: Heinemann, 1969.
- Mugumbate, J. and Nyanguru, A. (2013). "Exploring African Philosophy: The Value of Ubuntu in Social Work," in *African Journal of Social Work* 3(1), 82 - 100.
- Ndubuisi, F. O. (2013). "The Philosophical Paradigm of African Identity and Development," in *Open Journal of Philosophy* 3, (1a), 222 - 230.
- Oguejiofor, J. O. and Ezenwa-Ohaeto, N. (2015). "Contemporary African Philosophy, Identity and the Question of African Language," in *Ogirisi: A new Journal of African Studies* 11, 1 -18.

IGWEBUIKE: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities. Vol. 8. No. 2, (2022)

ISSN: 2488- 9210 (Print) 2504-9038 (Online)

Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Tansian University, Umunya

Oyserman, Daphna *et al.* (2012). "Self-Concept and Identity," in *Handbook of Self and Identity* (2nd edition), edited by Mark R. Leary and June Price Tangney, New York: The Guild Ford Press, 69 – 104.

Tempels, P. (1959). *Bantu Philosophy*, Paris: Presence Africaine.

Vignoles, V. L. (2017). "Identity: Personal and Social" in *Oxford Handbook of Personality and Social Psychology* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, edited by Kay Deaux and Mark Snyder. Oxford: University Press, 1- 20.