

# A Cross-cultural Perspective on Personhood

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**T**HIS PAPER WILL FOCUS ON A DESCRIPTIVE analysis of the conceptions of personhood in central Africa and in Japan. Its major intent, however, is not to provide an account of these culturally different notions of the human person for their own sake. Rather, I have selected them out of my firsthand sociological field experience to represent and illustrate two variants of a non-Western way of thinking about the person. Although the central African and the Japanese views are embedded in very different kinds of cultural traditions and are associated with a developing society, on the one hand, and an advanced modern society, on the other, they have certain fundamental attributes in common. The attributes they share are essential components in the ways that most societies and cultures of the world think, believe, and feel about personhood.

Seen in this comparative perspective, it is our modern Western and American outlook on the person that is more unusual than African or Asian ones. For this reason, an examination of the central African and Japanese views will throw into relief those features of our definition of the person that are culturally distinctive and, in some respects, unique to us. Thus, an examination of these conceptions of personhood very different from our own, but surprisingly like each other in key

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respects, has a reflexive value. It helps us to be less ethnocentric in our understanding of our cultural and societal notions of personhood and, in so doing, enables us to recognize its most salient and special characteristics.

Before describing the central African and Japanese views, I would like to identify some elements of the current American premises about personhood that stand in sharp contrast to them. First and foremost, in present-day American society we conceive to a remarkable degree of the person in individual and individualistic terms, emphasizing in this connection his or her rights, autonomy, self-determination, and privacy. This is all the more notable since one of the original meanings of person in Western civilization, as the Latin word *persona* indicates, is associated with theatrical masks, roles, characters, and functions (Lalande 1960, 759–60; Edwards 1972, 107). This term carries with it a dramaturgic view of the person in which the individual's identity and behavior are profoundly influenced by props, sets, a script, parts, a stage, and an audience. Both implicitly and explicitly, it is a social and an interactive conception of the human players.

In the American view, the individual person is seen as associated with and connected to intimate others, but in comparison with non-Western societies, the range of the significant others is highly restricted. The notion of kinship extends only to biological relatives; it does not usually include kin-like friends or patrons and clients as it does in many other societies. Even within the confines of strict biological relatedness, what we count as kin, with whom we identify, has shriveled over time and is now predominantly a matter of relationship to a spouse, parent, sibling, grandparent, and, to a lesser extent, aunt, uncle, and cousin. Extended family and clans, and relations with the deceased and the unborn, especially ancestors and descendants, so interpersonally and metaphysically important in African and Asian societies, all play a minimal role in the conscious conception and life of the American individual.

Our Judeo-Christian religious tradition with its golden rule enjoins us not only to recognize, respect, and be concerned about our brothers and sisters, but also strangers, and (according to the Gospels) even our enemies. This vision of who we are and how we ought to be related to others is both transcendental and universalistic. It catapults us far beyond our otherwise this-worldly, highly individualistic and particularistic bases of self-hood and solidarity.

But, as de Tocqueville observed, from the very birth of this nation the strong individualistic thrust of both our Protestant and our "democracy in America" traditions, combined with our emphasis on equality, have posed special and continuous challenges to our conception of community and our concrete realization of it. For de Tocqueville, our voluntarism, in the form of the proliferation of associations that we freely create around collective interests, needs, and purposes, was a distinctively and ingeniously American way of integrating our individualism with a sense of community that enabled us to achieve shared social goals.

The American notion of person has still other characteristic features. It is markedly rational, and also legalistic—prototypically expressed in the language of rights, and central not only to our Declaration of Independence and Constitution, but to a very wide range of issues that find their way into our courts and our legislatures.

In turn, these rational-legal aspects of our cultural outlook on personhood are associated with the voluntary, functionally specific, contractual model of social relations that has a predominant place in our society, particularly in economic and political spheres. As Emile Durkheim (1965, 211–16) reminds us, there is a fiduciary component in all contracts, no matter how rational, specific, and legal they may be—what he called the "non-contractual element in contract." In the American case, this commitment to live up to the terms of contractual agreement is deeply latent though usually not part of the conscious awareness of the parties involved, and even more rarely expressed in words or writing.

The American view of the human person is pervaded by logical-rational dichotomies. This view sharply opposes body and mind, thought and feeling, the conscious and the unconscious, self and other, reality and nonreality (imagining, dreaming, and hearing voices, for example, are not "real").

Taken as a whole, our conception of personhood has at least one major paradoxical attribute. Although it places a high positive value on a universalistic definition of the worth, dignity, and equality of every individual person, it tends to be culturally particularistic, and inadvertently ethnocentric. To a significant degree, it rests on the implicit assumption that its ideas about personhood are common to many, if not most, other societies and cultures. Beyond that, it assumes that the American way of thinking about the person represents

the way men and women of *all* societies and cultures should and do think about personhood when they are being supremely rational and moral.

## Personhood in Central African Culture

The notion of personhood in central African or Bantu culture is so fundamentally different from that of American and Western culture that in the majority of Bantu languages there is no term that corresponds exactly to the English word "person." This sociolinguistic fact is integrally connected with one of the most basic contrasts between African and American perspectives on the self. Whereas in American terms selfhood is a very individuated, discrete, private, bounded entity, sufficient unto itself, in an African framework it is defined, understood, and experienced as part of a living system of social relationships. What is emphasized in this view of the person is social context, namely a group, a category, or both. This is not to say that Africans are not aware of themselves as separate beings, or that they see themselves as totally submerged in a larger whole. They are distinguished and distinguish themselves from other individuals. The fact that they bear personal names indicates this. But as numerous Africanists—philosophers, linguists, and anthropologists—point out, these names often signify and express the person's status in particular social groups and categories, usually his or her relationship to kin and members of the village. They also can indicate the time and circumstances of one's birth. In certain tribal traditions, such as that of the Tio (in Zaire and in the Republic of Congo), where the child is given one name for the people on the father's side, and another for those on the mother's side, the composite names are so precisely indicative of the child's position in the total system of lineage and available family names, "that everyone in the village immediately recognizes to what groups he (she) belongs by the mere mention of the name. Hence the Tio designation, *nkwu ula*: name of the village" (Vansina 1973, 202). In other tribal settings, such as that of the Nyoro of Western Uganda, when one person is asked by another who he is, "he would be likely to respond by naming his agnatic clan, that is the social group (or rather, in Bunyoro, the social category) of which he is a member by birth. He might well add the name of his mother's clan,

thus locating himself more exactly in the genealogical framework of Nyoro society" (Beattie 1980, 314).

This stated relationship of the individual to significant, kinship- and village-defined others is so constitutive of the self that any serious disruption in these relationships does dangerous, even obliterating damage to the person and is believed to be supernaturally, as well as naturally threatening and potentially destructive to the family and the community as a whole.

As this implies, the African notion of person encompasses both a metaphysical and a physical world. It includes inner and invisible spheres as well as outer and visible ones. It fits into a system of relationships that includes the unborn and the dead, along with the born and the living. It is a link in a chain of ancestors and descendants. And it is at the dynamic center of the cycle of rites of passage that delineate and make sacred the stages of human existence. So much is this the case, that in many African traditions the person's name, which symbolizes his or her essence and distinct personality as well as social location, changes as major transitions are made from one stage of life to another.

The fact that the person is conceived as open and fluid, representing and permeated by multifarious forces and presences at work in this world and in the other world, accounts for one of the most intricate and perplexing aspects of the way that Africans define personhood. In every central African tradition, the person is viewed as composed of a number of separate but interconnected parts—what Louis-Vincent Thomas terms "*le pluralisme cohérent de la notion de personne*" (Thomas and Luneau 1975, 27–33; *La Notion de Personne en Afrique Noire* 1973, 387–419). The range of components considered to be parts of the personality is broad and varied, and includes immaterial as well as material elements. The body, and particular substances and organs of the body such as the umbilical cord, the blood, the heart, and the stomach, are frequently but not always included in the concept of the self. Some bodily parts such as the inner ear in Kongo tradition (Van Wing 1959, 286–89) are thought to have both spiritual and physical powers. There is also a multiplicity of immaterial elements that make up the person. Among the most common are the name, the breath, the shadow, the "double," and the twin. In addition, the person is believed to have received various souls at birth, most usually one from the father and one from the mother, and sometimes one

from an ancestor, too. In some traditions, a mystical connection is believed to exist between these souls and specific ritual objects and animals.

Although this composite self has an integral, unique-to-the-individual identity, it is not a static entity. Quite to the contrary, its various constituent elements are regarded as capable of fluctuating in amount and strength, increasing and diminishing, waxing and waning, in response to the play of forces acting within the individual and upon him or her from interpersonal, physical, and metaphysical sources. Central Africans are existentially preoccupied with the "power" or "force" of the various components of their being because they regard the relative strength and/or weakness of these elements as causally connected with their state of physical and psychic health and with other vital aspects of their relationship to the beneficent and dangerous entities and influences at work in the universe (Tempels 1949).

There is still another respect in which the African notion of a person is dynamic. As its rites-of-passage perspective on personhood suggests, becoming a person is seen developmentally—as a state that is progressively achieved through stages, and by degrees, including ancestorhood. This evolutionary conception of "person" also implies that some individuals and categories of individuals never obtain full personhood (for example, women who are barren and thus unable to give birth to a child), and that others are considered to be "nonpersons" (for example, slaves, as long as they remain in that status).

In this central African outlook, then, the personhood of an individual is defined and embedded in a system of relationships that are located in the "inner" and "invisible" world, as well as in the "outer" and "visible" one—worlds that are regarded and experienced as continua. The fact that the individual is surrounded by members of the family and clan, living and dead, and that their personhood is anchored in such a network of relationships is a primordial source of that person's physical, psychic, and spiritual security and well-being. But this same clanic solidarity on which one's good fortune, identity, and very existence depend is also integrally connected with the metaphysical danger and harm—the misfortune—by which individual persons and the community as a whole are constantly threatened. For, in the central African cosmic view, although

. . . all experiences and goals that human beings consider desirable and good are part of the natural order of things . . . the universe

also throbs with malevolent forces and presences that fall outside the natural order. All that is evil is caused by them, through the [conscious and intentional, or unconscious and unintentional] malignant thoughts and feelings of significant other persons. . . . Evil may come from any place, at any time, through the medium of many different categories of people. . . . [And] the members of one's own family and clan . . . are among the persons most able and likely to do one harm. "Behind the smiling face may lurk the hating heart." This is particularly true of relatives, whose very closeness may generate the kind of . . . pride, envy, malice, hostility . . . rancor . . . [that] have the capacity to cause harm . . . through harnessing the power of one of the . . . shades of the ancestors [or the] numerous kinds of spirits . . . present in the cosmos. Illness, sterility, failure, impoverishment, dissension, corruption, destruction, death—all the negative, disappointing, tragic experiences of life are caused [in this way] by witchcraft and sorcery (De Craemer, Vansina, and Fox 1976, 461).

Although good and evil are seen as polar opposites, for central Africans, there is also an "ambiguous zone" between good and evil. The ambiguity of this region lies not only in the discrepancy that may exist between the "mask" and the "intelligence inside it," but also in "the rapidity with which good may turn to evil. A person totally free of evil thoughts and feelings today may be completely possessed by them tomorrow, and the chameleonlike shift may be outside his intent or power to check." The equivocal and labile properties of the powerful forces at work in nature, in the clan and the village, and in the persons who constitute and belong to them, lie at the heart of the "existential anxiety, distrust and vigilance" that characterize the central African cosmic view, and that pervade the individual and collective lives of the persons who culturally dwell within this view (De Craemer, Vansina, and Fox 1976, 462).

## Personhood in Japanese Culture

On February 24, 1982, Hiroko Nakamura, considered to be Japan's best pianist and a former pupil of Rosina Lhevinne at the Julliard School in New York City, was a solo performer in a program of contemporary Japanese music held in Carnegie Hall. In a telephone interview with the *New York Times'* music critic, Harold C. Schonberg (1982), a few weeks before her arrival in New York from Tokyo, Ms. Nakamura reminisced about earlier stages in her career:

I was in love with Mme. Lhevinne. She was wonderful. She didn't say much, but when I played for her I felt as though I had had a nice hot bath. Everything felt clean and marvellous. She was an inspirational teacher. She was so nice to me. She would call me every day to find out how I was making out and to talk with me, encourage me. . . . [After finishing fourth in the Chopin Competition in Warsaw, three years later] I was depressed. I stopped playing for a year or so and thought things out in Tokyo. In New York and in Poland I did not know what I was. I had not found myself. New York has a big poison, and if you are not very strong you are destroyed. I was too young to handle it. . . I am not afraid of poisons any more. I have grown up.

In a compact, straightforward way this eloquent statement summarizes some of the basic patterns and themes that are quintessential to the Japanese idea of personhood. In that conception, preoccupation with, concern about, and sensitivity to social relationships and social interaction with other persons are dominant and pervasive. The Japanese concepts of self and self-identity are reflections of the "social relativism" (Lebra 1976, 1-21) that Japanese commentators single out as one of the chief characteristics of their culture. In this regard, the Japanese ethos sharply contrasts with the value placed on individualism and autonomy in the Western world, especially its tendency not only to separate the individual from the group, but also to elevate the individual above the group. In its relational emphasis the Japanese outlook on the person bears some resemblance to the Bantu perspective. But in contradistinction to the central African view, it is relatively "indifferent to the transcendental realm" (Lebra 1976, 9), and more this-worldly. The anxiety about relations with significant others is human-sized and human-focused without the supernatural or cosmic connotations that African anxiety carries with it.

What it means to be a person, then, in the Japanese sense, cannot be understood without reference to the individual's social ties: the particular, usually tight and limited "human nexus" to which he or she belongs, from which one derives identity, and to which one is totally committed. The "sense of social affinity" (Nakamura 1978, 409-17) is so fundamental to all personal experiences as well as to personhood, that it even exerts a major influence on the content and significance of what to Westerners would appear to be the antithesis of togetherness. Loneliness, for example, is not only a state of feeling to which Japanese are susceptible; it is one to which they readily



admit; it is a major romantic, and romanticized theme in popular songs; in whatever form it occurs, it receives a great deal of attention and sympathy. "Precisely because togetherness is so desirable, mild depression engendered by loneliness becomes a culturally articulated style of behavior" (Lebra 1976, 28). It is also a consistent theme that runs through the poetry of historic, Buddhism-influenced Japanese artists and religious figures who withdrew from the world of social relations and fetters, attached themselves to the beauties of nature, and became hermits or solitary travelers. Despite the serene contentment that they attained, the yearning for humanity and longing for companions was integral to their enjoyment of the tranquility that they continued to define and express as "life" and feel in their "hearts" (*kokoro*) (Nakamura 1978, 371-72).

In identifying themselves, Japanese usually stress what anthropologist Chie Nakane terms "frame" (*ba*) rather than "attribute." They not only locate themselves within a particular social context, group, or institution, but they give precedence to it:

. . . Rather than saying, "I am a typesetter" or "I am a filing clerk," he is likely to say, "I am from B Publishing Group" or "I belong to S Company". . . In group identification, a frame such as "company" or "association" is of primary importance; the attribute of the individual is a secondary matter. The same tendency is found among intellectuals: among university graduates, what matters most, and functions the strongest socially, is not whether a man holds or does not hold a PhD but rather from which university he graduated (Nakane 1974, 2-3).

But, as the yearning loneliness of the poetic hermits and solitary travelers suggests, "belongingness" for Japanese is not confined to a social frame or reference group in the here and now. It also includes one's group and place of origin, and groups and places to which one previously belonged (such as one's birthplace, the house in which one was raised, the school from which one graduated), and also symbolic locations (like the house registry in which one's name is inscribed, and the historical era and generation with which one identifies). Japanese refer to these original, previous, and symbolic forms of filiation as "belonging by memory" (Lebra 1976, 28).

Belonging, togetherness, identification, and identity entail a holistic relationship to the members of the groups with whom one is united.

Empathy (*omoiyari*) is considered to be one of the highest virtues in meaningful relations between self and others. It is indispensable to being a human person. What the Japanese mean by empathy is more than sympathy, concern, caring, or even compassion. It "refers to the ability and willingness to feel what others are feeling, to vicariously experience the pleasure or pain that they are undergoing, and to help them satisfy their wishes" (Lebra 1976, 38). The innermost as well as the outer experiences of the other are shared in such a way and to such a reciprocal degree that, for example, the suffering of one group member is responded to with guilt by other members, as if they were responsible either for causing it or for being unable to prevent it. The ideal of empathic understanding involves such a high degree of intuitive communication between individuals that they are able to enter into each other's "hearts"—the center of their inner worlds—and to know each other's feelings, without words. Physical togetherness not only enhances nonverbal, "heart-to-heart" exchange, but also constitutes a silent language of its own. (One of the archetypal forms of such communicative body contact is the physical closeness between mother and child that the Japanese call "skinship" [Lebra 1976, 138].) Through their social sensitivity to one another, persons bonded by and through empathy become "mirrors" for each other, reflecting and reciprocating each other's feelings. Gradually, such a rapprochement may take place between them that interpersonal boundaries are dispelled and a kind of social fusion occurs, that Japanese call "a feeling of oneness" (*ittaikan*) (Lebra 1976, 46).

As the foregoing suggests, not only empathy but also mutual dependency is integral to the Japanese conception of the person and the person's relationship to the group. One form of this dependency, *amae*, is such a central and distinctive part of Japanese culture that the renowned psychiatrist Takeo Doi regards it as "a thread that runs through all the various activities of Japanese society," historic and modern, normal and pathological, with a special relationship to the "spiritual culture" of Japan (Doi 1980, 11–27). As he points out, partly because "in the West, with its emphasis on the freedom of the individual, people have always looked down on the type of emotional dependency that corresponds to *amae*" (Doi 1980, 86), there is no equivalent term in English. The verb form *amaeru* means "to depend and presume upon another's indulgent benevolence." The concept *amaeru* is both active and passive, and is embedded in what sociologist

Talcott Parsons terms the "double contingency" of social interaction. Each individual in his or her social role must be able to seek, to receive, and to offer indulgent benevolence in sensitive synchrony with their empathic reading of each other's needs. *Amae* refers both to a personality trait and to a pattern of interpersonal behavior.

Emotionality, combined with esthetic sensibility and refinement, plays a key role in the Japanese world of human relationships. In fact, it could be said that (in contradistinction to the value emphases of the West) intuitive, emotional, and esthetic aspects of interaction and thought are given more attention and priority in Japan than cognitive, rational, and logical dimensions. What is meant by "emotionality" in the Japanese context, however, is not conceived to be the antithesis of rationality or exclusive of it, and it is neither unstructured nor unbridled. Quite to the contrary, it "can and must be controlled, subdued, circumscribed, or diluted" and expressed in correct, simple, concrete, but delicately nuanced ways. This is in keeping with the esthetic principles of the culture, and the bearing of these principles on the fact that "it is the social relationships, not one's own emotions, that count" (Lebra 1976, 16; Nakamura 1978, 556-57).

"Purity" in one's relationships with others is regarded as a cardinal virtue. The notion of purity as a virtue comes from Shinto, the indigenous religious tradition of Japan. Having "pure emotions," being motivated by them, and expressing them are considered to be manifestations of inner purity because of the importance attached to affect, and because of the degree to which emotionalism is culturally equated with the selflessness of moral purity. Emotional and moral purity are expressed as much through everyday, sensuous, and esthetic actions and interactions, such as bathing, sweeping, dusting, and presenting a tidy appearance, as through explicitly religious and magical rituals. And, in the Japanese way, it is not emotion but rather "cold, rational calculation that distances one from empathic identification with others which is regarded as indicative of inner pollution" (Lebra 1976, 161-62).

The special status that the Japanese accord to human relationships, with its emphasis on the empathic and solidary interdependence of many individuals, rather than on the autonomous independence of the individual person, includes within it several other core attributes. To begin with, the kind of reciprocity (*on*) that underlies human relationships means that both concretely and symbolically what an-

thropologist Marcel Mauss (1954) termed “the theme of the gift” is one of its dominant motifs. A continuous, gift-exchange-structured flow of material and nonmaterial “goods” and “services” takes place between the members of the enclosed human nexus to which each individual belongs. Through a never-ending process of mutual giving, receiving, and repaying (as described and analyzed by Mauss [1954] in his classic monograph *The Gift*), a web of relations develops that binds donors and recipients together in diffuse, deeply personal, and overlapping creditor-debtor ways. Generalized benevolence is involved, but so is generalized obligation, both of which take into account another crucial parameter of Japanese culture: the importance attached to status, rank, and hierarchical order in interpersonal relationships, and to what Takie Sugiyama Lebra (1976, 66–89) refers to as “proper-place occupancy” within them. The triple obligations to give, receive, and repay are tightly regulated by this status-formalism and sense of propriety. They are also mandatory within this framework, so that however generous and benevolent the gift-exchange may be, it can also be conducive to the kind of “tyranny of the gift” that Renée Fox and Judith Swazey (1978, 383) have identified in another connection.

Whatever the strictures, the demands, and the strains of these involved and involving social relationships, there is inherent to them an expectation of high “moral consciousness” of the norms, values, and mores of the particular social nexus to which one belongs, and of tight conformism to them. Beyond that, one of the supreme values of Japanese culture, the spirit of “harmony” or “concord” in human relations, is ideally supposed to prevail over all. (The first article of Prince Shotoku’s Seventeen-Article Constitution [604 A.D.] starts with the sentence, “Harmony is to be valued.”)

It should not be assumed that because Japanese personhood is “framed” and developed by “belongingness” and human relationships, the more one is submerged in the group, or submissive to it, the more one is a person with a “self.” “It is . . . extremely difficult to have a ‘self,’ ” Doi (1980, 140) comments, to be able to “transcend the group” while maintaining a “sure sense of belonging.” The Japanese are preoccupied with the question of the presence or absence of a self. Doi (1980, 132) points out that “the expression *jibun ga aru* (“to have a self”) or *jibun ga nai* (“to have no self”) is probably peculiar to Japanese.” “Having a self” refers to an individual’s awareness of some degree of independence and freedom from the group, whereas “lacking a self”

refers either to the individual's total involvement in the group or total isolation from it. Although deep identification with a social nexus and immersion in it is an indispensable condition of selfhood, it also strains selfhood, continually threatening its distinctness, integrity, and vigor. "The autonomy of an individual," Lebra (1976, 158) writes, "is assured and protected only in social isolation, only when a social moratorium is declared." Periodically, when they feel besieged by social responsibilities and involvements, out of touch with their "heart" (*kokoro*), and in danger of losing their sense of identity, direction, and meaning, Japanese retreat from their social involvements, emotionally and spiritually. Through introspection, the individual voyages into his or her inner world, reconnects with its center ("heart"), cleanses it of all "inner pollution," and thereby refinds and frees his true self. "Self-identity for a Japanese may ultimately derive from [establishing and reestablishing] confidence in the purity of his inner self" (Lebra 1976, 161).

We are now in a position to "decode" the statement that Hiroko Nakamura, the celebrated Japanese pianist, made to music critic Harold Schonberg. She described the loving, empathic, caring, supportive, inspirational, intuitive, nonverbal, cleansing relationship she had with her teacher, Mme. Lhevinne. She referred to the emotional crisis that she underwent after losing a piano competition, and attributed it to the fact that, in spite of her relationship to her teacher, she had not yet "found" herself, did not know who she was and, as a consequence, could not deal with the cold, impersonal, calculating "poison" of New York. She recounted how she called a moratorium on playing the piano for more than a year while she introspectively "thought things out" in Tokyo, in Japanese surroundings. And she affirmed that she was looking forward to returning to New York now that she was "grown up," "not afraid of poisons any more," and sufficiently "strong" not to be "destroyed." Miss Nakamura has emblematically depicted what being a person and having a self means "in Japanese."

## A Comparative Perspective

Via central Africa and Japan we have traveled a long distance, culturally as well as geographically, from a Western conception of the person and the self—its definition, its components, and the sources of its

“humanness.” As indicated at the outset of the paper, one of the primary purposes of this cross-cultural exploration has been to raise our own consciousness about some of the distinctive, singular, and even idiosyncratic features of the Western-American way in which we view personhood. “*Persona proprie dicitur naturae rationalis individua substantia,*” wrote the sixth-century Roman philosopher Boethius. It is this conception of the person as essentially individual and rational in nature—a premise that is deeply and anciently rooted in the history of Western civilization—that is at the core of our cultural and societal notions about personhood, and of how they differ from the assumptions about the “substantial nature” of the person that characterize most other civilizations in the world.

Central African and Japanese outlooks on the person, and the respective cultural traditions of which they are a part, differ profoundly from one another. But what they have in common is a perspective on the human person that most non-Western societies and cultures in the world share. They not only recognize, but they *emphasize* the contextual, relational nature of personhood, its inseparability from social solidarity, its body-and-psyche, as well as self-and-other holism, and its “inner,” emotive, symbolic, and ritual aspects. This way of looking at and understanding the person, on the one hand, and our own individual-oriented, rational and analytic, positivistic and legalistic perspective on the person, on the other, carry with them different sets of meanings, fulfillments, and strains for the individuals and groups who live within these frameworks.

An evaluation of the assets and liabilities of these contrasting conceptions of personhood goes beyond the scope and intent of this paper. Were it to be undertaken, it would require the most meticulous, in-depth kind of cross-cultural observation and scholarship, as free as possible from ethnocentrism, and also from its obverse—the self-critical romanticization of societies and cultures other than one’s own. The complexity of such an analysis and the probability that, if done truly and well, it would not fall easily into commonplace assumptions are suggested by some of the patterns that have emerged from the central African/Japanese comparison outlined here. For example, our analysis does *not* support the notion that in a cultural and social system that defines and embeds the person in a network of human relations, and that attaches high priority to social solidarity, individuals and groups are necessarily less subject to stress, or are likely to feel more

secure than those who belong to a society and world-view that consider individual autonomy paramount, and that urge and oblige the individual to be "independent." Furthermore, unqualified assertions about how clan solidarity acts as a deterrent to the economic and political "development" of a society, or about individualism as a condition sine qua non for modernization, are quickly and dramatically dispelled by the case of Japan.

However difficult it may be to do so, developing and maintaining a cross-cultural perspective on personhood is not only anthropologically and philosophically intriguing; it is vital at this historical juncture in our society and the world. Non-Western societies are grappling with the challenges to their cultural assumptions about what it means to be a person who is truly and fully human and alive in a more-than-corporeal sense, and the impact on the person by the West and in particular American society. Our global influence notwithstanding, in our own society we are currently feeling so pensive and unsure about what we mean by personhood that, in various forms, we are discussing the question "What is a person?" at conferences like this one, in our courts and legislatures, churches and synagogues, medical milieux, and in our media. It would seem that the worldwide questioning of the conception of personhood is an integral sign of the fact that, nationally and internationally, the magnitude of social and cultural change that has taken place in the twentieth century has shaken our separate and mutual convictions about something as basic as what we mean by our own and others' identity and humanity. If this is the case, then a nonparochial view of personhood is essential to our re-achieving clarity in order to arrive at a workable consensus about who we are and how we are related to one another in a society and a world faced with social, economic, and political problems, and moral and spiritual questions inherent to our material and nonmaterial survival.

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