Considering the communal aspect of narrating achievement

Mpho Tshivhase[1]

Introduction

Achievements are generally positively received and tend to invoke a sense of pride in the achiever and those around him/her. The narration of an achievement is often contextualized. A narration, understood in part as a process that involves the hermeneutic process of interpretation, unavoidably comprises of different perspectives. The varying perspectives, while they may share the same point of reference, i.e. an achievement, do not always share the same interpretation and meaning. What it means for the achiever to accomplish something is not always identical to the second person's perspective.

I am interested in the relational elements of one's personhood and their implications for the narration of a person's achievement. African scholars, such as Dismas Masolo and Ifeanyi Menkiti, insist that a person is marked by the way s/he embraces his/her relationality with others. Given the relational nature of a person, at least as understood from the African perspective, is it possible for an achievement and the narration thereof to be communal? I plan to explore the African value of relationality and its possible role in the narration of an achievement. I hope to defend the view that an achievement and the narration thereof should not necessarily maintain an individualistic tone because, while one's talent may arguably be an individualistic matter, the exploration and development of that talent, which is a necessary condition of achievement, is generally a matter that involves many others in the community – hence my consideration of the communal aspects of narrating achievement.

What it means to be a person

What it means to be a person on the African communitarian view is a matter of how one relates to other people. According to Ifeanyi Menkiti, being a person is a mode of being that is acquired. Herein, one is not born a person, but rather develops into a person. He argues that individuals develop personhood through seven life stages that are governed mainly by biological factors. Herein, he makes a distinction between the processual nature of personhood and the human being. The processual stages of personhood are childhood, adolescence, adulthood, parenthood, elder-hood, ancestor-hood, and finally the nameless dead phase (Menkiti 2004, 326-27). The main point is that human beings are mainly a

1 Mpho.tshivhase@up.ac.za

biological species while persons are moral entities.

Masolo approaches personhood by analyzing some African languages or rather certain words in them. In doing so, he hopes, in part, to make better sense of the relation between personhood and society in characteristic African cultures. His opinion is that people have an awareness of their status as human beings, but for them to cultivate their awareness into that of personhood they must be part of a community, as personhood is a socially developed way of being. This point of view relies on the perspective that we are born humans who can develop to become persons, where that process of becoming a person is always incomplete and includes the possibility of one failing at it (Menkiti 2004, 326; Masolo 2010, 139-43, 155-60).

African conceptions of personhood cite group solidarity as a central feature of a traditional society (Menkiti 2004, 324). Ifeanyi Menkiti and Kwame Gyekye, central figures in the African debate on personhood, argue differently about the extent of the community's authority in the definition of a person. Menkiti argues that the community wholly defines personhood (1984, 171). Menkiti's view is characterized by John Mbiti's "I am because we are and, since we are, therefore I am," which Menkiti accepts as the "cardinal point in understanding the African view of man" (Mbiti 1969, 108-09).

Gyekye criticizes Menkiti for giving in to the "temptation of exaggerating the normative status and power of the cultural community in relation to those of the person and thus obfuscating our understanding of the real nature of the person" (1992, 106). With the aim to collapse the tension between the self and community, Gyekye develops a more flexible view, the moderate or restricted communitarian view, which accommodates communal and autonomous individual values and practices as part of one's personhood (1992, 106-13, 115-16, 120-21). African communitarian thought presents different conceptions of personhood, but most theorists are in agreement that personhood is largely, if not exclusively, a communal matter (Kaphagawani 2006, 332, 337-38).

Personhood and achievement

There is an underlying idea of personhood as a matter of achievement – moral achievement. Herein, persons are also products of their community, which is relevant to the communal nature of narratives of achievement. There is a sense in which the relationship between the individual and the community becomes inextricably bound so that it becomes difficult to make sense of an achievement through the isolation of the achiever from the community.

Achievement is an event that occurs within a particular social context and so there are often many aspects involved. The point I want to make here is that narration is always contextualized where such context necessitates relationality. An achievement does not happen in a vacuum. It happens in the midst of interpersonal relationships that either nurture or hinder one's goal. Often it is the first person's perspective that should matter in

the narration of an achievement. However, given the societies within which we often find ourselves, the first person's perspective is often drowned in other social and/or political agendas that tend to take priority. In this way, one's achievement becomes a beacon of hope for others.

These social and political elements are evident in the achievements of women, especially black women who, for instance, become the 'first black female CEO' of this and that organization. Herein, it is evident that the achievement of becoming an executive in an organization symbolizes a break in the racial and patriarchal barrier that prevented (black) women to compete on equal terms with men. Understood in this way, excellence ceases to be a privilege that is limited to a few, and the achiever is thus celebrated for, in part, being daring enough to break that glass ceiling, as it were.

Moreover, while one's achievement is not primarily aimed at contributing to the moral enhancement of the community, it does ultimately benefit the community. The schools that one went to, the church in which one was christened, the siblings relatives and friends that one has, all share the pride of one's achievement so that one's achievement is, almost at once, their achievement too. Herein the phrase '*you have made us proud'* is indeed the expression of the communal aspect of achievement wherein 'us' refers to the community where you may have grown up as well as the larger global context within which your achievement occurs.

While the effort that is invested – in terms of having a dream, doing the work, showing up and so forth – is all individually driven, the achievement itself and the narration of that achievement are often a communal matter mainly because of the context within which one's achievement occurs. In much the same way that the development of one's personhood is a communal matter, so is achievement.

Reference list

Gyekye, Kwame. 1992. "Person and Community in Akan Thought." In *Person and Community: Ghanaian Philosophical Studies, I*, edited by Kwasi Wiredu, and Kwame Gyekye, 101-22. Washington DC: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy.

Kaphagawani, Didier Njirayamanda. 2006. "African Conceptions of a Person: A Critical Survey." In *A Companion to African Philosophy*, edited by Kwasi Wiredu, 332-42. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Masolo, D. A. 2010. *Self and Community in a Changing World.* Indiana: Indiana University Press.

Mbiti, John. 1969. *African Religions and Philosophy*. London: Heinemann Educational Publishers.

Menkiti, Ifeanyi A. 1984. "Person and Community in African Traditional Thought." In *African Philosophy: An Introduction*, edited by Richard A. Wright, 171-81. New York: University Press of America.

Menkiti, Ifeanyi A. 2004. "On The Normative Conception of a Person." In *A Companion to African Philosophy*, edited by Kwasi Wiredu, 324-30. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing