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African Personhood, Humanism, and Critical Sankofaism: The Case of Male Suicide in Ghana

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10.1 Introduction

Suicide in certain African contexts, such as in Ghana, is socially proscribed and subject to widespread moral condemnation. Not only is it illegal to attempt or commit suicide in Ghana—making one vulnerable to criminal prosecution if unsuccessful—but non-fatal suicide attempts are highly stigmatised to the point that individuals (and sometimes their family) are treated as social outcasts. A child will not be named after those who attempt or commit suicide for fears of contagion; sometimes they are refused a proper burial or the dead body may be whipped prior to removal [1]. As a social injury and violation of the common good, moral responsibility falls squarely on the shoulders of individuals and/or family members. These cultural norms are evident in the following narratives:

They beat me up mercilessly, hitting me with all kinds of objects—stones, sticks, using their hands. I was weak and tired...[I]t worried me a lot, the way I was disgraced, the fact that I had been a responsible worker before, with a bank ... in fact I was traumatized very much. At a point I hid myself and was unable to even step out of the house [2, p. 276].

I was told I was not a part of the family again. During family discussions I was disallowed to make contributions. Also even communal labor was very disturbing as people continued to avoid my company and make mockery of me when I attended it; hurling all kinds of insults at me. At a point I thought I should even try hard and end it all. You see you can really feel very bad after the action [2, p. 277].

In fact my experience after my suicide attempt was worse than what I was going through initially. It was like everybody turned against me. I thought after the attempt people will be caring and supportive. But they were rather judgmental, they insulted and even my friends did not welcome me into their fold. Each time I visited them in a group I felt abandoned because it was like no one wanted to associate himself with a person who wanted to kill himself [2, p. 277].

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Shame associated with falling short of societal expectations around financial security and masculinity can also motivate suicide attempts:

I took a loan from Barclays [Bank] and one other from Ghanafin, a private financial institution that deals with loans ... So, Barclays takes from my salary and Ghanafin too ... so I went to the bank on Monday thinking I will get something small to take and they said my account has been closed! ... I blame myself for all these ... I feel ending my life will resolve all these ... my creditors will soon start chasing me ... the shame and all that ... Man, 34 [3, p. 239]

The phenomenology around male suicide in Ghana reveals a complex, potentially contradictory web of communitarian values that are thought to be central to African personhood—or what it means to be identified and recognised as a person with a certain moral status. Crucially, African personhood is a *socially attained* status that reflects the extent to which one is embedded within communal values. By implication, individuals who violate social norms central to group cohesion and well-being—such as proscriptions against suicide—warrant moral condemnation and blame. Such individuals relinquish (or possibly never attained) the social status of personhood; equally, however, strong gender norms implicitly sanction suicide over shame.

This contradiction could lead to charges of incoherence against the so-called ‘traditional’ African communitarian values around personhood. However, this chapter points to important internal resources within African thinking which encourages critical reflection of values that disregard the humanity of individuals. The Akan¹ tradition of *critical sankofaism* can help illustrate how African cultural values often contain important internal normative resources capable of responding to problematic views of shame and male gender norms which make suicide appear as the only option.

10.2 Suicide and Social Values around Gender

In Ghana, suicide is an act of *musuo*—extraordinary, uncommon, and indelible evil ‘which brings suffering... to the whole community, not just to the doer alone’; as such, it is a complete abhorrence to the community [4]. As illustrated above, survivors are subject to intense moral condemnation, labelled sinner transgressor, outcast antisocial, or criminal, and viewed as deserving social sanction and abuse. Actions that are *musuo* reveal a flawed moral character in Akan moral thought and practice; individuals who attempt or commit suicide are therefore thought to reveal a

¹Akan refers to one of the major ethnic groupings within Ghana and its conceptual schema and moral practices have been systematically theorised in the African philosophical tradition. In this chapter, I use Akan and African interchangeably—this is not to deny the fact of plural and diverse cultures and traditions within Africa. But I follow Gyekye [9] in his assertion that there are similar cultural patterns within Africa, one of which revolves around the communitarian conception of the self and person.

fundamentally evil character which lacks consideration and responsibility to family members and the communal good.

Male suicide is also closely connected to gender norms around avoiding shame. Fears of experiencing dishonour, disgrace, and moral sanction are deeply embedded in Akan moral practice. Various moral maxims describe how disgrace leads to a sense of shame: 'It is unbecoming of the Akan to be in disgrace' (or 'Disgrace does not befit the Akan': *animguase mfata okanniba*) [4, p. 139]. Fear and avoidance of shame function as strong motivation to act in accordance with social-normative expectations. Another maxim states powerfully, 'Given a choice between disgrace and death, one had better choose death' (*aniwu ne owu, na efanim owu*) [4, p. 139].

The shame of failing to meet certain masculine norms has been found to prompt fatal and non-fatal suicidal acts, as clearly illustrated in the man facing financial difficulties [5]. Local sayings promote certain male character traits, such as courage and bravery in adversity: 'a man doesn't cry' (*ɔbarima nsu*); 'a man does not fear death' (*ɔbarima nsuro owuo*); 'it's a real man who takes bitter medicine' (*ɔbarima na ɔnom aduro a eye nwnono*) [5, p. 658]. These societal expectations of mental invincibility and physical strength in the face of suffering 'coincide with a general cultural prohibition against men's public expression of such emotions as fear, anxiety, pain or sadness, which are interpreted as forms of weakness', making it 'unmasculine for a man to express or admit feelings of weakness and emotional dependency' [6, p. 475].

Social expectations further uphold masculine ideals of sexual potency, procreation, and providing economically and materially for one's family; achievement of these ideals constitute successful male identity in society. By contrast, those in role reversals—where women function as economic providers—are described as 'useless man' (*ɔbarima hunu*) and subject to social stigma [5]. Virility and sexual prowess are likewise important. The ultimate test of masculinity is to have one's own biological children; impotency and childlessness are met with ridicule accordingly. Failure to achieve valued masculine identities and socially expected roles is a cause for low self-esteem, a sense of personal failure, defeat, and entrapment [5]. Shame around loss of social status generates feelings of defectiveness and helplessness, leading to fatal or non-fatal suicidal behaviour.

Rather ironically, the motivation behind male suicide reveals a strong identification with societal norms and expectations associated with what it means to be a valued male person in the community, as well as the internalisation of the blame directed towards individuals who fail to fulfil those norms. The depth to which these are internalised can paradoxically undermine the resiliency that is socially expected of male individuals. Obstacles and frustrations in fulfilling social responsibilities (procreation, economic provision, etc.) cause substantial anxiety and the perceived—and sometimes real—loss of dignity. A man's exaggerated sense of personal responsibility and self-blame for his own failure accurately reflects social norms where shame and disgrace are tantamount to the loss of personhood. In short, 'local axioms [...] seem to provide tacit approval for men to use suicide for addressing shame' [5, p. 663]. Suicide appears to be a fully coherent response, confirmed even by commonplace proverbs.

10.3 Communitarianism of African Personhood

The priority of the community over the individual is frequently cited as a distinctive feature of African personhood, particularly in comparison to Western individualism. Menkiti describes that ‘persons become persons only after a process of incorporation. Without incorporation into this or that community, individuals are considered to be mere dangles to whom the description ‘person’ does not fully apply’ [7, p. 172]. Menkiti’s formulation lends itself to a strong constitutive reading of communitarianism, whereby ‘the individual self is defined by, integrated into, and constituted in the community by the organic processes of acculturation, socialisation, moral education, and ritual integration’ [8, p. 1010]. This strong reading contains two notable features: first, personhood is a *normative social* concept in the sense that the achievement of moral personhood comes only with the ability to fulfil one’s communally-determined duties and responsibilities [8]. This normative conception of personhood presumes that developing persons are inculcated within a society that prioritises certain values surrounding one’s pre-eminent responsibility to one’s family and community, which become manifest in moral character and behaviour aligned with such commitments. Second, personhood is a *socially attained* status rather than a presumption of human species membership: the achievement of personhood is proportionate to one’s participation in communal life and the extent to which the different obligations of one’s social role are fulfilled [7].

The attainment of personhood clearly depends on the integration of communal values so that one acts within the constraints and possibilities of what is socially acceptable, making norms of personhood and sociocultural context mutual reinforcing. An individual’s understanding of self, responsibilities, and actions must embed the values and interests of one’s community. Recognition of a person can then be contingent on conformity with and the achievement of socially determined benchmarks of success. Conversely, ‘the decline in the values of a person [...] may also indicate a decline in the values or culture of the community of which the person is part’ [8, p. 1008]. All persons therefore share responsibility in contributing to the welfare of the community. The moral status of personhood is earned when social norms are properly internalised and social obligations are fulfilled as an upstanding member of the community [9]. Whether individuals observe or disregard their duties to the social community can mean the attainment, diminishment, or even loss of one’s status of personhood. Thus, the communal context *shapes* individual selves while also *evaluating* who deserves the status of personhood based on their compliance to socially expected norms.

On this account, failures to carry out socially expected obligations and roles are viewed as instances of personal irresponsibility, callousness, or generally vicious character. The Akan belief that habitual actions influence the development of one’s moral orientation overall means that ‘one is [...] responsible for the sort of person one is [and] the state of his or her character’ [9, p. 150]. Falling short of the criteria of personhood is therefore morally blameworthy because such actions disclose the wrong normative orientation towards oneself and one’s community.

Yet the case of male suicide lays bare the incoherence at the heart of this strongly communitarian conception of personhood: what drives the behaviour of the individuals in the case studies above is not a rejection of social responsibility or disregard for the community, but rather an intense sense of personal responsibility towards fulfilling socially informed norms and roles, particularly associated with gender. For example, the failure to realise male norms related to economic security engenders the self-blame pervading in the man's narrative above, making suicide preferable to social ostracisation. If anything, such examples demonstrate how the *overidentification with* and *internalisation of* socially constituted duties and norms can lead to the very circumstances, motivations, and behaviours that impede the achievement of normative personhood. The worry, then, is that values of African personhood seem to imply 'a cramped and shackled self, responding robotically to the ways and demands of the communal structure', thereby potentially perpetuating and worsening the underlying issues associated with male suicide [9, pp. 55–6]. Moreover, a constitutive account of personhood would have to admit that the failure of individuals to act in a manner aligned with personhood lies partly with the community's values, practices, and incorporation rituals.

This suggests that reflective mechanisms need to be in place to encourage the critical examination of African traditions, particularly in the examination of potentially destructive but socially affirmed norms related to mental health, gender, and personhood. But rather than abandon the communitarian values of African personhood altogether, we must tease out ways in which its humanistic core can temper and limit the demands of the community. Important internal resources are present within Akan moral thinking which would help challenge some of the more pernicious implications of strongly communitarian African values.

10.4 Critical Sankofaism

The case of male suicide may tempt one to reject the communitarian basis of personhood altogether and presume that critical analytical resources need to be imported from Western frameworks. African practices and conceptual schemas are often *reduced* to a static, unreflective tradition while those from the West are seen as *removed from* tradition. Yet this disregards the fact that Akan thinking contains crucial critical resources that belie this mischaracterisation of African social practices and traditions as stagnant and unthinking. The Adinkra symbol of *sankofa* is particularly fruitful in this context: visually depicted as a mythical bird flying forward while looking back, *sankofa* communicates the philosophy of retrieving lost or forgotten gems from the past as one moves forward; it involves reclaiming parts of African practice, history, and standpoints that have been hidden or distorted [10].

At times the pursuit of *sankofa* has been interpreted as endorsing the blind revival of African cultural values, leading to the uncritical adoption of the past or certain traditions simply by virtue of it symbolising the renaissance of an African tradition and putative subversion of the Western colonial legacy. This *naïve sankofaism* presumes that African values and ways of life are normatively valuable in a

wholesale sense and are capable of being revived in a pristine, authentic, and precolonial form. Yet as Gyekye explains, just as the sankofa bird will spit out rotten seed going forward, so too should approaches to traditional cultural values be critically reflective in ways that consider their functionality and appropriateness to fundamental human needs in contemporary life, captured in the Akan proverb that ‘A person cutting a path does not know that the past that he has cleared behind him is crooked’ [9, p. 262]. *Critical sankofa* is therefore a process of reclaiming cultural values through the critical evaluation which leads to the reflective endorsement or rejection of past practices or traditions. It demands being conversant with cultural forms to grasp the deeper meanings and possibilities immanent from that tradition; equally it requires a way of working dialectically between one’s experiences and needs in the present and the critical interpretation and retrieval of worthwhile values and wisdom from the past. In other words, critical sankofa involves the reflective sifting through, refining and pruning of, different aspects of the cultural past, to determine whether it warrants a place in the current scheme of things. Those values that ultimately deserve reclamation and revival will promote attitudes, practices, and behavioural patterns that are conducive to the attainment of basic human needs—thus functioning as a potential framework for development [9].

Critical sankofa therefore provides an important normative framework *internal* to African cultural schemas, enabling the critical evaluation of problematic dimensions of shame, disgrace, and gender norms within African communitarianism that are manifest in the phenomena of male suicide in Ghana. The core ideals of African communitarianism rest on socioethical values of solidarity, interdependence, mutual aid and obligation, yet, as Gyekye states, ‘[t]he communitarian social arrangement, as established and practiced in African cultures, has, however, spawned some features that have thrown the worthwhileness and continuity of the arrangement in its old form into question’ [9, p. 252]. Problematic masculine ideals and communitarian social arrangements coalesce to some degree, as male norms are closely connected to one’s ability to fulfill one’s responsibility to meet the needs of group members. Such responsibility is difficult to bear unless one possesses economic wealth and influence [5, 9], meaning values associated with male economic power—and shame when one falls short—intermingle with the communitarian sense of self and one’s sense of belonging in deep ways. Yet through the lens of critical sankofa it becomes clear that sociocultural values of what ‘being a man’ amounts to—reinforced tacitly in local idioms around the preferability of death to shame—corrupt rather than capture the humanism at the core of African communitarian values. Patriarchal expectations associated with economic viability, sexual prowess, and male potency distort the ways in which the needs of the community are to be fulfilled (i.e. support for the needs of those less fortunate, the promotion of familial ties, etc.), and indeed, *devalue* the human being who is subject to such expectations.

To see this, one has to understand the humanism that is the basis of African communitarian personhood. The highest worth of and consideration owed to a human being is expressed in the Akan proverb, ‘It is the human being that counts; I call upon

gold, it answers not; I call upon cloth, it answers not; it is the human being that counts' [9, p. 258]. To value a person as a human being involves expressing virtues of compassion, generosity, and a sense of moral duty to assist others to benefit their interests and welfare. It is to 'acknowledge that her worth as a human being is equal to our own and that there are some basic values, ideals, and sentiments (such as hopes and fears) that we all share by virtue of our common membership in the human species' [9, p. 259]. The community must therefore uphold and embody certain humanist and egalitarian norms of moral regard, care, and concern for others, which function as the normative framework that enables individuals to actualise the potentiality of attaining the status of personhood. As Nyerere describes, 'In traditional African society [...] we took care of the community, and the community took care of us ... Nobody starved, either of food or of human dignity' [8, p. 1008]. Individuals are presumed to have certain psychological characteristics, such as the ability to make deliberative, freely willed choices, and can be held responsible for fulfilling obligations towards others and one's community as such. Each individual likewise possesses intrinsic worth such that one should 'care for her well-being or needs just as she cares for the needs of others' so that 'altruistic concerns cannot obliterate responsibilities to the self' [9, p. 69].

Thus, from the perspective of critical sankofa there is a clear disconnect between the sociocultural norms around masculinity which engender shame when one falls short as opposed to the core virtues expressed in valuing human beings and developing and meeting basic human needs. Returning to the opening narratives, the man who had survived a suicide attempt anticipated and hoped for care and support but was met instead with bitter condemnation and isolation by both his family and community. Meeting the challenge of male suicide in Ghana will therefore involve counteracting and critically challenging harmful dimensions of sociocultural norms around gender and promoting understanding of those who attempt suicide—recognising how social ostracisation devalues the intrinsic value and needs of human beings, as well as distorts the tradition of mutual aid, compassion, and empathy embedded in the humanistic core of African communitarianism.

10.5 Conclusion

Critical sankofa is an important process which evaluates and retrieves what is worthwhile about the humanism that grounds African community and personhood. The critical reflexivity of critical sankofa challenges pernicious distortions of African values in the context of suicide, as well as more generally the exoticisation and static characterisation of African traditions and values. Critical sankofa also has important implications beyond this context: although discussed as an internal African resource, this approach has clear similarities to Western hermeneutical frameworks that situate current practices within a historical, interpretative tradition. The hermeneutical process involves working dialectically between the acknowledgement and critical evaluation of traditions and cultural practices through the prism of contemporary questions and needs. Western discourses that medicalise suicide can ignore how such behaviours represent a 'life crisis situation' where

individuals and their environment interact in dynamic ways, and as such, critical scrutiny of Western sociocultural values and norms around gender are put to one side. A hermeneutical approach modelling a similar process to that of critical sankofa could promote greater reflection on the distorted values, practices, and traditions that can devalue human beings and motivate suicide within Western cultures.

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