The Relationship between Ndorobo Personality and African Traditional Religion as a Human Development Issue

By

Ashdown Shelly

Abstract

Personality (olkuak) is a salient non-physical self element featured in Ndorobo practice of African traditional religion. Personality is the primary sociocentric element of a person divinely placed in an individual to serve as a conscience. The ideals of personality are valued by Ndorobo as behavioral precepts for the foundation of traditional religion. Understanding the relationship between personality and African traditional religion and how it involves human development issues is the subject of this paper.

Introduction

Among the Ndorobo, a small Maa-speaking ethnic group in Kenya, personality (olkuak) is a central non-physical element of self featured in Ndorobo practice of African traditional religion. Understanding the relationship between personality and traditional religion and how it involves human development issues is the subject of this paper. Ndorobo world view is a rich, multicolored fabric intricately weaving together social, individual, and spiritual aspects of human existence. Addressing needs in one of these areas demands attention to all the dimensions. Surprisingly, the personality is a key non-physical Self component in the discussion of Ndorobo world view and community development.

Ndorobo personality

Ndorobo believe a person is born into a particular social group by the will of Creator God, Enkai, and are destined to be a product of social forces within that culture. The Ndorobo non-physical Self encompasses elements which join the person and community members together in an integrated fashion. The primary sociocentric element of the person is called, olkuak. The Ndorobo individual always and necessarily exists as a bearer of olkuak.

Olkuak is often translated ‘personality’ but bears little resemblance to the English translation. It is conceived in a radically different mode of thought. Ndorobo view the person as an extension of the community, one pebble in a bucket of sand. One grain is meaningless and easily overlooked; a handful takes form, fills space, and therefore has meaning and use. The personality of the person, their olkuak, submerges Self within the community thereby providing a person with purpose, value, strength and most importantly, a means of expression.
Self is made continuous with community by olkuak. The initial capacity for personality is given to a newborn by Enkai and content is generated from the social environment. Shaping olkuak into an acceptable personality is insistence by parents and community elders on obedience from those younger members of society. Personality is to be submissive to the will of the collective Other and by doing so olkuak becomes what community makes a person.

As alluded to earlier, personal identity as a Nd orobo with a Ndorobo personality is construed as a destiny appropriated by Creator God. In this way, individual destiny cannot be separated from the social reality of which the person is a member. A Ndorobo proverb teaches, “You cannot jump over what is destined for you” (Impaayo Ngayami, personal communication, September 24, 1997). Destiny is not a predetermined set of occurrences naturally expected in a Western scientific cosmology. It is personality, a social identity. Herein lays the limit of individualism. Self existence is intricately linked with social existence and cannot be adequately grasped outside it. Destiny confirms the status of personality and joins the person to the community in such a way as to intertwine individuality and community. Olkuak is rendered meaningful by appeal to destiny as a divine course and community as a divine destination. The proverb declares, “One does not collect the honey from someone else’s beehive,” meaning, “That which is destined to be yours will remain yours” (Julius Ngayami, personal communication, October 13, 1997).

Olkuak rejects the idea of an isolated existence. Instead personality is an imitation of those around the person. It is the product of the environment in which a person lives, “the behavioral habit of the person” learned from the community (Thomas Nchonshoi, personal communication, June 23, 1998). The personality issues directives to the person in what to believe and how to behave and changes as the community affects it. If one turns away from their personality, one does not only betray the community and cultural heritage, one betrays themselves. A Ndorobo proverb teaches, “Whoever leaves his olkuak is a slave,” meaning the one who departs from Ndorobo cultural principles for life chooses evil and becomes a slave to evil (Leintoi Turo-omom, personal communication, June 26, 1998).

Developing a good personality is synonymous with valuing and acting out Ndorobo ideology, otherwise the person will suffer the consequences of being ruled by evil. One elder related the most important point he could convey to his children concerning their enkishui, translated ‘life’ or ‘soul,’ was not to go against or abandon their olkuak, because it is given by Enkai. This implies olkuak exercises great influence over life - a life that has been divinely chosen and predetermined. The person is expected, not only by the community but by Creator God himself, to act in accordance with cultural constraints.

The Ndorobo personality of olkuak defies the Western theoretical concept as something inner and thus not directly observable. If anything, it is the exact opposite. Olkuak is manifested in overt and recognizable forms of social behavior. Ndorobo believe personality comes from the actions of the person. It is considered cultural behavioral habits which express features of Ndorobo behavior expected and shared by members of the community. The individual presents themselves to the community by way of olkuak. It is an observable phenomenon and not an Abstraction to the Ndorobo psyche. The person is what is observed by others. Either the person has developed a good olkuak and behaves accordingly or has chosen an unsavory personality and shows this by behavior deemed socially inappropriate. Behavior is a mirror of an inner state the individual is not capable of hiding or masking.

The individual has a strong need to belong, work and live cooperatively with others in the community. This sociocentric Self and the cultural provisions that sustain it are found in personality. Olkuak is a culturally encoded dogma transmitted from generation to generation as
pragmatic, authoritative principles endorsed by the divine. It is considered a moral link, giving the person the necessary rudder to steer into acceptable, culturally moral waters. When this link is severed the person is doomed to wander into all manner of social ills, become lost to himself and society, and suffer severe reprisals.

The norms of propriety and appropriateness dictated by olkuak require self expression conform to those mandates. Olkuak provides individual acceptance and value, and places it in the realm of the social environment. Personality guarantees an inner life of harmony if developed into a good, strong olkuak. Conformity to personality becomes a moral issue sanctioned by Enkai as a means of coercing members to follow community dictates. It is believed a person shares the soul of God when he is good, that is when he follows his olkuak. Personality is perhaps the most important moral concept in Ndorobo belief. A person is morally evaluated according to their personality, whether good or bad.

Olkuak provides each individual with a course way through life to, at the very least, survival and beyond to a satisfying life. Proper orientation of Self toward Ndorobo moral code is the result of a good, inner personality. Olkuak is a qualification of moral oughts. Nowhere is this more adequately shown than in a narrative depicting a greedy son. A boy working in the fields sees visitors approaching and quickly runs in the house to eat the porridge ready for that morning’s breakfast. He begins gulping down the porridge and in his excitement does not realize it is boiling hot. Suddenly his throat is burned, he becomes deaf and faints. Instantly knowing his folly, his mother comes in and curses him.

The son has committed an unpardonable social error. Sociability is the highest value in Ndorobo world view and is defined partially in terms of offering sustenance to visitors. The son’s greed was an immoral act quickly resulting in harsh consequences and punishment. His personality chose an iniquitous attitude, prompted him to wrongful behavior, and tortured his physical body. The concept of olkuak creates a link whose connectors weave across that which is moral, social, physical and non-physical and, in the process, make the causes in one realm affect others.

Olkuak provides the ultimate purpose of individual life wherein all that is good and pure is sought and found. It is commitment to community survival by individual devotion and service to what society defines as Ndorobo. Individual members are recognized and appreciated for their individual contributions and respected as such on an individual basis. But individual achievement or success is always measured against the standard of fulfilling the values and expectations of one’s olkuak. Nevertheless personality can be bribed, cajoled, influenced, and corrupted. If one does not treat one’s olkuak properly or elders fall in responsibility of shaping an acceptable personality, it will become tainted and lead the person astray.

The ideal notions of olkuak should not be considered just as a varnish covering an otherwise unruly Self. Olkuak gives the fabric of social relationships emotional meaning guided by conscience, character and honesty. Through olkuak the person is made aware of a personality model of life which is a cultural persona derived from divinely instituted tradition. The validity of the model is substantiated by the knowledge that elders shaping the young personality were taught and influenced by respected forefathers.

The continual reference to tradition is a constant and plays an active role in the development of personality. Olkuak infuses the person with tradition through the personality element. It is a complex of attitudes and conduct guiding present behavior by reference to the past. It is an awareness of others from the past, in the present, of the future. Identity is linked to the past and implicates future generations. For this reason, olkuak is a predominant characteristic of the non-physical Self and traditional religion in Ndorobo world view.
Ndorobo personality and African traditional religion

Olkuak is the moral ideal in Ndorobo thought giving rise to harmonious integration of the person with the world. It is a guiding force over Self aspiring a quintessential social order in which members of the community live in harmony without quarrelling. Abandoning one's olkuak is equivalent to lost knowledge. It is ignoring a knowledge of right and wrong by rejecting the moral imperative and values of one's social heritage. This can only be restored by Creator God, Enkai, through corrective measures causing a repentant heart. In this way, personality serves as conscience. The idea that conscience is "a complex of residual habits" imposed by society is somewhat descriptive of the Ndorobo notion of conscience (Gbadejesin 1991:68).

The foundation for conscience is laid out in the young, developing olkuak. Personality then serves as the definitive source of right and wrong throughout the lifetime of the individual. Again, it is divinely sanctioned and divinely instituted to act in this way. Enkai has endowed each individual with a rational heart to acquire a personality with a moral and socially conscientious nature.

Olkuak serves as conscience by issuing the standard of ethics the person measures himself against and as proctor of moral reasoning. The ideas of moral rightness and wrongness are not found in a separate, bounded element but are included in the functional role of personality. Personality is a discerning element, one that determines good and evil. The individual notions of right and wrong which distinguish people from one another in part are the result of what each olkuak has been taught and subsequently accepted.

The role of conscience by personality refers to defined consequences for individual action. The reasons one seeks to be morally good is a prudential answer of a social nature in Ndorobo thought. First and foremost, death is caused from immoral, sinful behavior. The termination of life is commonly believed a consequence of evil deeds. The motivation to follow a good personality is an extended lifespan.

The moral ought is also strengthened by the affection parents have for their offspring. Perhaps it cannot be guaranteed a person will reap the benefits of honoring their conscience in their lifetime, but surely successive generations will be blessed or cursed from inherited consequences. Children receive portions of good or evil commensurate with the moral actions of the parent. Allowing the conscience to steer the person into peaceful relations in the community causes children to benefit from these relationships after the parent dies.

Inherited consequences are applied to a living parent also. Children born with birth defects or born dead are explained as the result of the mother's guilt of iniquity while carrying the child. If the mother sins, then the unborn has sinned also. Of course, this is not the will of Enkai; nonetheless, a child cannot enter the world with sin already inside. Creator God is the giver of pure, unblemished life. A new life that is somehow less than perfect has to be the result of sin, and specifically, by the mother. The value of human life is too highly regarded not to beware of any inappropriate behavior.

Equally as compelling as a long life and a blessed life for children is that goodness should reap a harvest of blessing for the person during their lifetime. Enkai is the purest form of goodness, the embodiment of virtue. Hence all that is good is given by him and has no other source. Goodness begets blessing; blessing translates into material wealth and social unity. Undesirable experiences are defined by social beliefs and are induced by wrongful action as punishment. The ultimate appeal for allowing olkuak a commanding position in one's life is that it will benefit you to do so.
Within olkuak is a reverence for divine omnipresence, the inescapable eye of Enkai on man. To understand how complete this belief is to Ndorobo, consider the following folktale of a good child.

Long ago there lived a man and his wife and children. He called his children and his whole family together and it seemed that they had come to believe in Enkai like those who knew the Word of Enkai. So one day he called his children because there were rotten eggs that were hidden inside the house. He called his young boy and young girl and told them to go and throw these rotten eggs away where no one could see.

The young boy took the eggs and went running to a place far away and easily seen and threw the eggs there. The young girl respected her parents and had a healthy fear of her mother and father. She tried to find a place to throw the other rotten eggs but she could not because there was not anywhere void of a person - Enkai is everywhere. He sees in a hole and there is no place that does not have His presence.

The girl went home and told her father, “I did not find a place to throw these eggs. I thought that even if I go inside a hole, Enkai is watching.” Her father told her, “Come my child. You are a good child and obedient because you saw and respected that Enkai is the overseer of all. There is not a place anywhere that you can hide from Enkai. Enkai is in heaven and you are under His eyes. You cannot escape Him by entering a hole.” (Jackson Ngayami, personal communication, June 18, 1998)

Enkai is the overseer of all creation including the individual actions of the person. Each individual is “under His eyes” and “cannot escape Him” even for a moment (1998). This is a threat to child and adult alike and a constant reminder personality uses to coerce good behavior. Ndorobo emphatically state that wrong behavior is always wrong even if the person does not suffer bad consequences. Why? Because Enkai is watching. The Ndorobo personality element is a “remembrancer” that Creator God witnesses both good and evil and will justly reward accordingly.

Motivation for Ndorobo behavior

The knowledge of Self Ndorobo come to understand through the personality element and its relationship with their notion of traditional religion may be viewed as a significant regulator of ongoing behavior. This interpretation and shaping of conduct is accomplished by personality producing specific motivation toward fulfilling the divine mandate of responsible community membership. One motivational source which encourages the person to comply with their personality is that social i.e. moral misconduct can cause physical and mental illness. A second significant motivation is one of divine vindication and blessing on those fully accepting the gift of personality.

The pure and righteous nature of Creator God underscores a major connection between the supernatural and personality. Because Enkai is anthropopsychic, the activities of man influence him; because he is kindhearted and generous, he is moved with pity for those calling to him in need. Since Creator God represents the image of complete goodness, he must therefore demand goodness from his creation. Man is obliged to behave in a righteous manner according to the code of good and evil Enkai has given through personality. All that is good comes from Enkai as the result of following the precepts of one’s olkuak.

While the primary function of Enkai is to protect and give prosperity to man, he also allows misfortune such as an illness or natural disaster as a punishment for wrong actions. The
The consequence of breaking from olkuak is exposure to evil and suffering. The belief in divine vindication is a core belief. Socially approved behavior is rewarded by the Creator and deviancy is punished. Divine punishment and reward are dispensed to the person in their lifetime rather than following death. All the dead have the same fate regardless of their earthly existence. Enkai has provided personality to define good and evil during earthly life.

One young Ndorobo man concluded the most important tenet to teach children concerning the soul is that respect for others comes from the soul. Disrespect shown to others damages the soul (enkishui) because respect is a product of olkuak which is controlled by the spirit (inkinyanget). If the spirit element which is housed in the soul causes the personality element to act against social expectations of deference, then the soul may be blemished by an undisciplined personality influenced by an evil spirit (Jackson Ngayami, personal communication, June 16, 1998). A person must exercise self control found in personality over emotion, desire, and decision by conforming to cultural expectations for behavior otherwise enkishui, representing soul or life, is threatened.

These beliefs relating to the community and supernatural demonstrate how personality is intertwined with soul and spirit to influence behavior and contribute to the maintenance of social order which is a feature of African traditional religion. An individual must weigh personal emotion and desire against the cultural pressure of sanctions and incentives in everyday life personality advocates and the consequences, positive or negative, guaranteed by spirit forces. The individual is strongly motivated by the ability of the divine to vindicate with either blessing or punishment.

Relational dichotomy of two aspects of Ndorobo behavior

A Ndorobo views himself as subject to the will of Enkai for his overall life journey and secondly, to the operation of spirit forces present in daily life. There is a continuous competitive struggle between good and evil spirits to occupy each human spirit element. Ndorobo refer to this as a tug of war for purity between the soul element as Creator God's representative presence in a person and the spirit element as man's choice for personal desire. Given the pure nature of the soul originating in Enkai and coming directly from him to the person, the soul desires only that which is good. The soul can never deviate from this inherent state of virtue. This places the soul element in direct confrontation with the spirit element and evil spirit entities.

Metaphorically, the soul represents Enkai, his unchanging pure nature, and his life giving power; the spirit represents man, his ever-changing nature from good to evil, and his mortal life. The soul element is incorporeal continuity of the divine, and the spirit element is incorporeal discontinuity (see Figure 1). The soul element is an enduring virtuous presence just as the eternal existence of God. The spirit element vacillates between good and evil making the inhabitant impermanent. This characterizes the temporary existence of man and his unpredictable behavior.
That which is an enduring goodness in this life, the community, is a natural accompaniment to the divine nature of the soul and is represented by personality. The divine stability of the soul is symbolic of personality and regarded as unchanging, lasting, and dependable. Just as the soul and personality are an enduring forces of goodness given by God, so too is the community. The integrity of community precepts are always to be trusted and accepted by a person to lead toward that which is morally correct. Thus personality directs a person toward conformity to cultural mandates of behavior by divine appointment.

On the other hand, personal desire is recognized as anything but trustworthy. The changing nature of the spirit element produces an incorporeal instability within a person. This instability is symbolic of desire. Desire as well as emotion and decision are characterized as changeable, fleeting, and undependable. These elements are greatly influenced by the causal power of spirits and represent the wants and counsel of one rather than the culturally valued needs and advice of community order.

Conclusion

The importance of Ndorobo personality is underscored by its divine design. Creator God has authorized the element of olkuak to establish identity and membership for a person in the community. By doing so, personality serves to protect the individual and contribute a vital safety net to his survival. It is also a guiding force of how Self is expected to develop throughout life by defining the appropriateness of behaviors, values, and beliefs. Personality is given by the Creator as a socially interactive concept firmly bound to correct behavior.
Olkuak describes the extent and context autonomy versus cooperation are tolerated or expected in the Ndorobo context. An individual is offered a particular way of participating in his world by Enkai especially in regulating human relationships. A Ndorobo then defines himself through these interrelationships with community Other by the principles outlined in olkuak. Olkuak serves as custodian of cultural heritage and the guarantor of cultural continuity. In practice, the element of personality is mostly presented as a traditional, literal prescription for individual behavior. The impact of this notion of olkuak is the description of each person as a particular community member who is exclusively a socially determined being and as such, also fulfills divine destiny and will.

It should be clear the concept of olkuak as it is threaded throughout Ndorobo traditional religion plays a significant role in human development issues for the Ndorobo context. Any long term initiatives toward individual and community change will be impeded without honoring the ideals of olkuak. The development process should draw on the values of a good personality as a motivation for cooperating behavior and ownership of projects by the Ndorobo community. Ignoring these fundamental world view assumptions fails to capture the unique motivating forces behind Ndorobo behavior.

Human development, according to the United Nations Development Programme, is about creating an environment in which people can develop their full potential and lead productive, creative lives in accord with their needs and interests (UNDP 2006). Thus the reference is to resources beyond material goods and includes intellectual and social resources as well as religious ones. Most policymakers today accept that sustainable development can be achieved only if people build on their own resources. Infatuation by the European Union with development in African countries has largely ignored the centrality of religion to African world view (Ter Haar and Ellis 2006). By doing so, the EU has failed to consider metaphysical questions in development planning which dominate African life because the EU operates from a Western social evolutionist paradigm (Tyndale 2001).

African religiosity has shown the secular world that religion is not destined to fade from public memory once a society enjoys technological advancement. Africans continue to assimilate new forms which aid in development without changing basic assumptions about spiritual realities, and the results have been mixed. Sustainable development has been fleeting thereupon leaving some experts to consider whether religio-spiritual assets are an untapped means of support (Marshall and Keough 2004). McCleary (2007) argues major religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam) have salvific merit/damnation incentives which encourage social action resulting in economic success and this can also be argued for African traditional religion. In the Ndorobo context, community members associate prosperity with acting upon social precepts in personality ordained by Enkai. The success of whatever change is suggested in the Ndorobo context is dependent on engaging the cultural assumptions comprising olkuak.

References


Ashdown Shelly
Dallas, Texas